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Old Havana, the historic district of Cuba's capital city

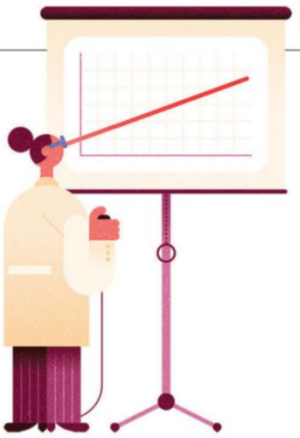
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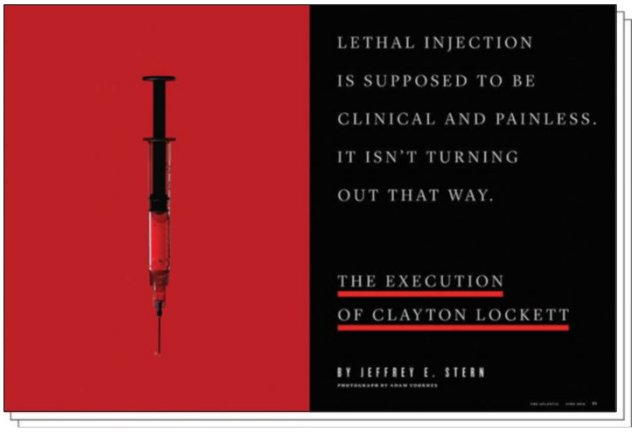
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The Conversation

RESPONSES AND REVERBERATIONS



DEBATING THE DEATH PENALTY

In June, Jeffrey E. Stern provided harrowing details of a botched execution ("The Execution of Clayton Lockett"). As prison officials scramble to find drugs for lethal injections, convicts appear to be physically suffering when they are put to death by the state.

Jeffrey E. Stern's article demonstrates how well-meaning public servants are corrupted as they are pulled deeper into the nightmare of trying to give us something we cannot have: an easy, neat, and painless way of killing another human being.

The death penalty has become increasingly rare and disfavored because it does not enhance public safety. In 2014 there were only 72 new death sentences nationwide; 80 percent of the 35 executions that took place in 2014 took place in just three states (Texas, Missouri, and Florida). The Pew Research Center has found that public support for the death penalty for convicted murderers is at a 40-year low of 56 percent. Opposition has increased to 38 percent.

We all benefit from a criminal-justice system that is sensible and effective—a system that creates a safer society with less crime. Yet this is not what our current system is doing. The murder rate is lowest in the Northeast—the region with the lowest number of executions. In contrast, the South carries out the most executions of any region, and has the highest murder rate in the United States. We know that crime happens when other issues are neglected—insufficient mental-health services, a lack of safe and affordable housing, an outdated education system that does not prepare our future workforce.

When we do things like provide high-quality education for all children, ensure safe and affordable housing, give workers a living wage, and meet everyone's mental-health needs, we prevent crime and create vibrant communities.

This article demonstrates that the death penalty can no longer be a feature of our legal system. It's time for an immediate halt to all executions.

Douglass Reeves
New York, N.Y.

Mr. Lockett shot a girl and buried her alive, leaving her to die a horrible death. Do-gooders are bemoaning the fact that he took a few extra gasps of air while being executed. Pain during a chemical injection is trivial compared with what this vicious murderer did to his victim and what many killers do to their victims.

Myron Kayton
Santa Monica, Calif.

I sincerely hope that anyone picking up this article, no matter how hell-bent on this type of eye-for-an-eye punishment, is made aware of how truly inhumane the death penalty is. Lethal injection is by no means easy or peaceful. There are no better words than *cruel* and *unusual* to describe it.

Bonnie Ellman
Great Neck, N.Y.

Stern would have better served the public interest if he had commented on (or even supported) the use of nitrogen gas as a means of execution. As a method, it is noninvasive, painless, reliable, and inexpensive, and it involves no hard-to-get chemicals.

If a person is put in a situation that involves wearing a nitrogen mask, or being in a gas chamber where only nitrogen is available to breathe, that person will simply pass out and then expire due to lack of oxygen. No poison. No pain. No suffering. It is obscene that so much time and money are being spent on legal proceedings when such a simple, reliable, humane solution exists.

Clark Kurtz
Canandaigua, N.Y.

The solution to problems with government execution by injection is quite simple. The use of heroin to kill convicted prisoners is neither cruel nor unusual, and the drug is readily available in all states. A secondary benefit of using heroin for executions is that the drug's deadly nature will become apparent to everyone. Heroin kills—on Skid Row and on fraternity row, and it will work just fine on death row.

G. E. Nordell
Rio Communities, N.M.

#TWEET OF THE MONTH

@TheAtlantic article on botched #ClaytonLockett execution is an indictment on our botched #deathpenalty system

— @helenprejean
Sister Helen Prejean, anti-death-penalty advocate and author, Dead Man Walking

CLINTON'S CANDIDACY

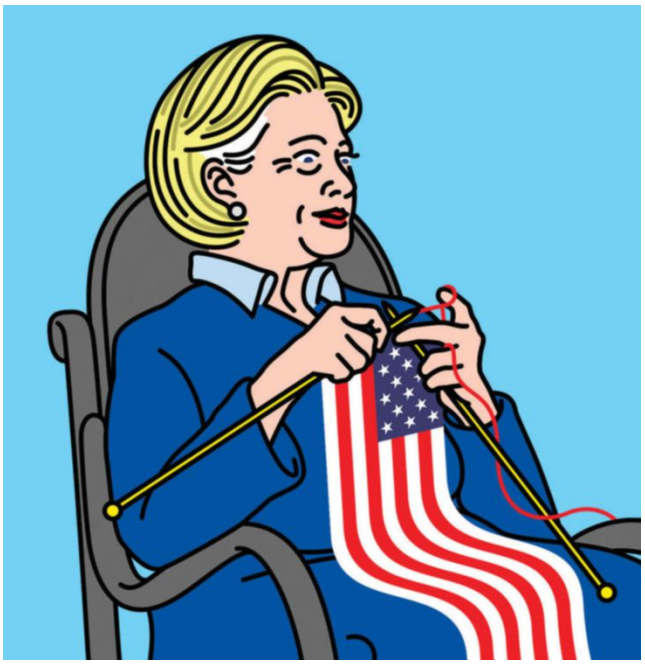
In June's "Playing the Granny Card," Liza Mundy asked, "Is a generation of powerful women"—including the presidential candidate Hillary Clinton—"turning age to its advantage?" In politics "much more so than in some other arenas," Mundy noted, "age can be an asset."

Liza Mundy's article was interesting and amusing, but I think Hillary Clinton can't be elected president, despite the examples of Angela Merkel, Elizabeth Warren, and those postmenopausal killer whales. It's because she's an "old" Democrat.

Looking at presidential elections back to Franklin Roosevelt's first, there's a clear pattern: virtually all successful Democratic candidates have been young. Jimmy Carter, the oldest nonincumbent Democrat at the time of election, was 52—younger than the youngest Republican, George W. Bush, 54. Three Democrats were elected in their 40s, and FDR was only 50.

Henry Stimpson
Wayland, Mass.

If elected president, Hillary Clinton will be 69 when she is inaugurated. The only woman discussed in the article who holds a position even remotely like U.S. president is German Chancellor Angela Merkel. She was 51 when she was elected, and is just 61 today. The other exemplars—Janet Yellen, Elizabeth Warren, Christine Lagarde—have jobs that do not require extraordinary energy or quick response to emergencies. They control their own agendas and pace of response in almost every aspect of what they do



professionally. The presidency requires enormous energy, long hours, and the ability to react quickly in emergent situations. For most people, those characteristics deteriorate noticeably in their 70s. While Clinton may prove to be an exception, that is a risk inherent in her candidacy (and Senator Bernie Sanders's), despite Ms. Mundy's attempt at literary alchemy.

Ralph M. Lowenbach
South Orange, N.J.

A NEW PRESCRIPTION

Gabrielle Glaser's April article, "The False Gospel of Alcoholics Anonymous," prompted thousands of letters to the editor and comments on TheAtlantic.com, many of them about personal struggles with alcohol. The June Conversation featured several of these letters, but readers have continued to weigh in. One took the article especially to heart.

I wanted to thank you for giving me information that may turn out to save my life, or at least make it better. I have been a heavy drinker for my entire adult life, since that first light beer at high-school graduation. While lucky enough to avoid most of the checklist disasters (DUI, anger management, lost family and friends) that lead most people to say "I am an alcoholic" and start attending meetings, I have always known that it is the truth.

I have also always known that a 12-step program was never going to be the solution for me. I went to a few meetings and just knew I could not do that for the rest of my life. But two days after reading your article, I had my annual physical. My doctor is aware of my intake and has been monitoring my liver function for a few years. When he asked about my drinking, I told him what I'd read, expecting that he would cringe at being "educated" by a patient.

To my surprise, he was encouraging, and we developed a plan, with goals and a prescription for Naltrexone. I took the first 25-milligram pill a few days later, in the morning. When I got to my workshop, I grabbed what would normally be the first beer of the day and guzzled it at once to see what would happen. Mostly just a large burp, so I opened another. (I should mention that this is par for the course.) The second beer just sat there. I felt like I was watching a part of me walk out the door.

I didn't have a drink for three days straight after that single pill. My doctor told me to take one a day, but I currently take one about every two days. I have also deliberately not taken a pill, in order to have a "party day," but that makes me a lot better than I was and a lot more like a guy who abstains all week and then enjoys a Saturday.

It's way too soon to tell the long-term effects for me, but I can certainly see the author's point that if this modern method were combined with the support and discipline of group programs like AA, then the future could be a lot better for addicts. So thank you. From the bottom of my liver.

Christian
Santa Barbara, Calif.

CORRECTION

"The Art of Avoiding War" (Robert D. Kaplan, June) said that the Persian army pursued the Scythians "early in the sixth century B.C." This happened around 512 B.C., which was late in the sixth century.

To contribute to The Conversation, please e-mail letters@theatlantic.com. Include your full name, city, and state.

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Foreign Policy

THE SURGE FALLACY

Having misunderstood the lessons of the Iraq War, Republicans are taking a dangerously hawkish turn on foreign policy.

BY PETER BEINART



OVER THE PAST DECADE, the foreign-policy debate in Washington has turned upside down. As George W. Bush's administration drew to an end, the brand of ambitious, expensive, Manichaean, militaristic foreign policy commonly dubbed "neoconservative" seemed on the verge of collapse. In December 2006, the Iraq Study Group, which included such Republican eminences as James Baker, Lawrence Eagleburger, Ed Meese, and Alan Simpson, repudiated Bush's core approach to the Middle East. The group not only called for the withdrawal from Iraq by early 2008 of all U.S. combat troops not necessary for force protection. It also proposed that the United States begin a "diplomatic dialogue, without preconditions," with the government of Iran, which Bush had included in his "axis of evil," and that it make the Arab-Israeli peace process, long scorned by hawks, a priority. Other prominent Republicans defected too. Senator Gordon Smith of Oregon called the president's Iraq policy "absurd" if not "criminal." George Will, the dean of conservative columnists, deemed neoconservatism a "spectacularly misnamed radicalism" that true conservatives should disdain.

That was then. Today, hawkishness is the hottest thing on the American right. With the exception of Rand Paul, the GOP presidential contenders are vying to take the most aggressive stance against Iran and the Islamic State, or ISIS. The most celebrated freshman Republican senator is Tom Cotton, who gained fame with a letter to Iran's leaders warning that the United States might not abide by a nuclear deal. According to recent polls, GOP voters now see national security as more important than either cultural issues or the economy. More than three-quarters of Republicans want American ground troops to fight ISIS in Iraq, and a plurality says that stopping Iran's nuclear program requires an immediate military strike.

What explains the change? Above all, it's the legend of the surge. The legend goes something like this: By sending more troops to Iraq in 2007, George W. Bush finally won the

→

ILLUSTRATION BY EDMON DE HARO

Iraq War. Then Barack Obama, by withdrawing U.S. troops, lost it. Because of Obama's troop withdrawal, and his general refusal to exercise American power, Iraq collapsed, ISIS rose, and the Middle East fell apart. "We had it won, thanks to the surge," Senator John McCain declared last September. "The problems we face in Iraq today," Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal argued in May, "I don't think were because of President Bush's strength, but rather have come about because of President Obama's weakness."

For today's GOP leaders, this story line has squelched the doubts about the Iraq invasion that a decade ago threatened to transform conservative foreign policy. The legend of the surge has become this era's equivalent of the legend that America was winning in Vietnam until, in the words of Richard Nixon's former defense secretary Melvin Laird, "Congress snatched defeat from the jaws of victory by cutting off funding for our ally in 1975." In the late 1970s, the legend of the congressional cutoff—and it was a legend; Congress reduced but never cut off South Vietnam's aid—spurred the hawkish revival that helped elect Ronald Reagan. As we approach 2016, the legend of the surge is playing a similar role. Which is why it's so important to understand that the legend is wrong.

The legend of the surge is this era's equivalent of the legend that America was winning in Vietnam.

By 2006, three years after American troops deposed Saddam Hussein, the situation in Iraq had grown terrifying. Violence had begun with a largely Sunni insurgency against the American occupiers and the Shia Muslims they had brought to power. But after Sunni jihadists bombed a famous Shia mosque in Samarra that February, Shia militias retaliated, sparking wholesale slaughter across the sectarian divide. The Tigris River became so clogged with human corpses that some Iraqis stopped eating its fish, believing their taste had changed.

In January 2007, Bush responded to these horrors not by withdrawing U.S. troops, but by sending 30,000 more. He also redirected U.S. military strategy. Under the leadership of General David Petraeus, U.S. troops began focusing less on killing insurgents and more on protecting Iraqi civilians, in hopes of reducing the insecurity that allowed the insurgency to thrive. American troops, working alongside Iraqi ones, went to live among the Iraqi people.

Fortuitously, these changes coincided with a shift among some Sunni leaders. By 2007, many had grown alienated by the harsh fanaticism of the al-Qaeda jihadists who had taken up residence in their midst. More important, some Sunni leaders realized that they could not defeat the more numerous Shia. Driven out of large sections of Baghdad, they came to see American troops as the only force capable of saving them.

In a daring about-face, Petraeus's forces began paying the very Sunnis who had once fought Americans to fight al-Qaeda instead. That August, seeing a drop in Sunni attacks, the Shia militia leader Moqtada al-Sadr agreed to a cease-fire. The decline in violence was astonishing: In 2007, the war took the lives of 26,000 Iraqi civilians. In 2008, that number fell to just over 10,000. By 2009, it was down to about 5,000. When Republicans today claim that the surge succeeded—and that with it Bush won the war—this is what they mean.

But they forget something crucial. The surge was not intended merely to reduce violence. Reducing violence was a means to a larger goal: political reconciliation. Only when Iraq's Sunni and Shia Arabs and its Kurds all felt represented by the government would the country be safe from civil war. As a senior administration official told journalists the day Bush announced the surge, "The purpose of all this is to get the violence in Baghdad down, get control of the situation and the sectarian violence, because now, without it, the reconciliation that everybody knows in the long term is the key to getting security in the country—the reconciliation will not happen."

But although the violence went down, the reconciliation never occurred. According to the legend of the surge, Iraq's collapse stems from Obama's decision to withdraw all U.S. troops at the end of 2011. "If we'd had a residual force of 10,000 to 12,000," Senator Lindsey Graham said last year, "I am totally convinced there would not have been a rise of al-Qaeda." In reality, the prime minister of Iraq, Nouri al-Maliki, began persecuting the Sunnis—thus laying the groundwork for their embrace of ISIS—long before American troops departed the country. As early as 2007, writes Emma Sky, who advised both Petraeus and his successor, General Ray Odierno, "the U.S. military was frustrated by what they viewed as the schemes of Maliki and his inner circle to actively sabotage our efforts to draw Sunnis out of the insurgency." In August 2008, Shawn Brimley and Colin Kahl, then affiliated with the Center for a New American Security, warned:

> There is a gathering storm on Iraq's horizon. Over the last several weeks, its central government has embarked on what appears to be an effort to arrest, drive away or otherwise intimidate tens of thousands of Sunni security volunteers … If Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Maliki and his advisors persist in this sectarian agenda, the country may spiral back into chaos.

The tragedy of post-surge Iraq has its roots in America's failure to make the Iraqi government more inclusive—a failure that began under Bush and deepened under Obama. In 2010, Sunnis, who had largely boycotted Iraq's 2005 elections, helped give a mixed Shia-Sunni bloc called Iraqiya two more seats in parliament than Maliki's party won. But the Obama administration helped Maliki retain power. And Obama publicly praised him for "ensuring a strong, prosperous, inclusive, and democratic Iraq" even after he tried to arrest his vice president and other prominent Sunni leaders.

These errors came well before Obama's decision to remove American troops at the end of 2011. The fact is, the U.S. failed to stop Maliki's slide into sectarian tyranny even when it still

had 100,000 troops patrolling Iraqi soil. That's because America had already lost much of its leverage. Once the surge succeeded in reducing violence, Maliki no longer needed American troops to keep him in power. By 2010, U.S. aid to Iraq had dropped dramatically. Iraq was buying American weapons, but had the oil revenue to buy them elsewhere if America stopped selling. And the Obama administration could not pressure Maliki by threatening to withdraw U.S. troops, because Maliki wanted them gone. So did most of the Iraqi people.

The problem with the legend of the surge is that it reproduces the very hubris that led America into Iraq in the first place. In 2003, the Bush administration believed it could shatter the Iraqi state and then quickly and cheaply construct a new one that was stable, liberal, democratic, and loyal to the United States. By 2006, many conservatives had realized that was a fantasy. They had massively overestimated America's wisdom and power, and so they began groping for a new approach to the world. But then, in 2007 and 2008, through a series of bold innovations, the United States military bribed, cajoled, and bludgeoned Iraqis into multiple cease-fires. The Iraqi state was still broken; its new ruling elite showed little of the political magnanimity necessary to reconstruct it in an inclusive fashion. And the Band-Aids that Petraeus and his troops had courageously affixed began peeling off almost immediately. Nonetheless, Republicans today say the Iraq War was won, and would have remained won, had the U.S. left 10,000 troops in the country after 2011.

How much damage will the GOP's revived hubris do? Inconceivable as it would have seemed a few years ago, Graham, who is now a Republican presidential hopeful, has suggested sending 10,000 American ground troops back into Iraq. (His GOP rivals generally support this idea but have not proposed exact troop numbers.) The U.S. is unlikely to send a sizable American ground force back into Iraq. But this line of thinking is troubling nonetheless, because the same wild overestimation of American power that fueled the war in Iraq now fuels the right's opposition to the nuclear deal with Iran. To hear hawks tell it, the United States can scuttle the current deal, intensify sanctions, threaten war, and—presto—Tehran will capitulate. But Iranians have been living under the threat of attacks from America or Israel for more than a decade now. And British and German diplomats have warned that if the U.S. Congress torpedoes the agreement, sanctions pressure on Iran will go not up but down, as countries that have lost billions by limiting their trade with Tehran stop doing so.

One day, Republicans will resume the painful work they began in 2006—the work of reconciling conservative attitudes with the limits of American power. Let's hope they don't do too much damage before that day comes. *A*



Big in …

FRANCE

License to Intimidate

CORSICA, THE rocky island about 110 miles south of mainland France, has a reputation as a place of deep honor, short tempers, and easy violence.

These are characteristics for which motorists across France would like to be known, apparently. Since 2009, when a new rule permitted French drivers to order license plates from any region, Corsicans, or rather Corsican plates, have been appearing on roads throughout the country. (Under the old system, which was running low on numbers, plates were matched to one's home region.)

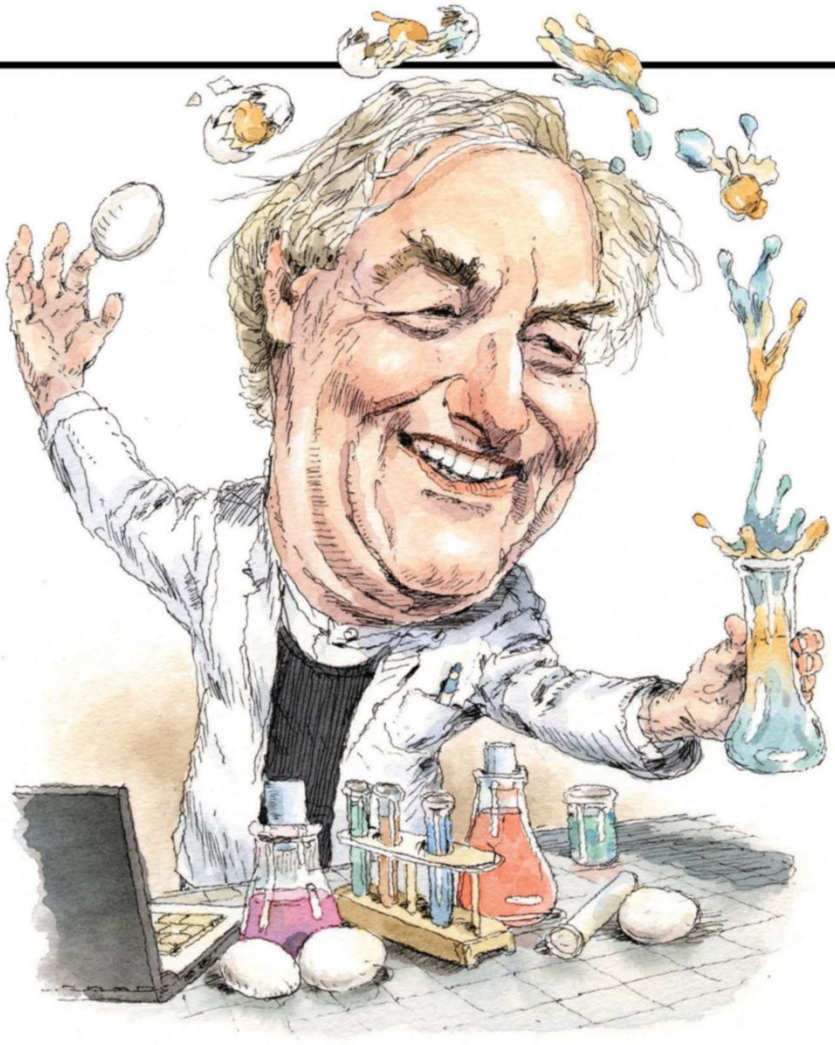
The French can be a bit touchy behind the wheel: flip someone off and he is liable to swerve in front of you, slam on the brakes, hop out, and offer to defend his pride with his fists. Corsican plates, which bear an image of a Moor's head—the emblem on the island's coat of arms, as well as the symbol of its small but murderous independence movement—are thought to help avoid this sort of situation, signaling that their owners are not to be honked at, cut off, or otherwise crossed. "It's becoming a code to show that you're a rebel and that you're hot-blooded," the manager of one plate-maker told *Le Figaro* last year. Other people suggest that cars with Corsican plates may be less vulnerable to abuse by vandals and bored teenagers. In an interview with *Le Parisien*, Gabriel Xavier Culioli, a Corsican writer, called the popular image of the island's residents "grotesque," and lamented the plates' appeal to men "who want to pass as tough guys."

Although Corsica is the least populous of France's 22 regions, its plates are top sellers across the country, manufacturers and retailers say. Norauto, a chain of repair garages, sold 76,000 Corsican plates in 2013, despite not having an outlet on the island. When I spoke with David Bisinger, the head of sales at one of France's main license-plate manufacturers, he noted that of the 13 cars parked in his employee lot that day, six had Corsican plates. "I don't have any Corsicans working for me," he said.

Whatever the benefits of Corsican plates, Bisinger pointed out that blending in with the locals still has advantages. His own plates are from his native Burgundy, and when he is in Paris, he told me, "I automatically get honked at." As for Parisians, across the rest of the country they are considered haughty and entitled, and also wimpy drivers. Parisian plates are thought to invite punishment from other motorists. According to Bisinger, no one but a Parisian would dream of buying them.

— Scott Sayare

ILLUSTRATION BY JI LEE



Sketch

THE TEST-TUBE CHEF

Hervé This, the father of molecular gastronomy, thinks the meals of the future should be constructed from chemical compounds.

BY BIANCA BOSKER

It was dinnertime, and Hervé This was building us a steak. Explaining that a nice sirloin is 40 percent water and 60 percent protein, the French chemistry professor dumped four tablespoons of water into six tablespoons of powdered egg. (As it happens, he was wrong: the proportions are closer to 70 percent water, 20 percent protein, and 10 percent fat.) In went a pinch of allyl isothiocyanate, for a mustardy kick.

"What about having the potato *in* the steak, instead of french fries on the side?," This (pronounced *Tees*) asked the standing-room-only crowd of pastry chefs, professors, and fermenters who had packed an NYU lecture hall last October to hear him speak. He used a microwave propped on a table as a lectern, and moved aside his other ingredients—the dehydrated egg, along with vegetable oil, salt, and sugar—to rummage through a case of clear glass vials stoppered with black lids. He unscrewed a small bottle of methional oil, which has a cheesy-potato flavor, and the room's fresh-carpet smell gave way to baked potato mixed with high-school gym. "So here is some potato," he said, pouring the methional into his dough. "How many potatoes do you need?"

At a time when much of the culinary world believes in farming like pioneer settlers and looking its meat in the eyes, This wants us to abandon peas and carrots ("Middle Ages!") for their constituent parts—glucose, sucrose, cellulose, amino acids, and more. He showed his audience a picture of wooden shelves stocked with rows of identical white containers and a scale. "This is the kitchen of the future," he declared. "Beautiful boxes—some contain liquids, some contain powder."

A celebrity academic who advises Michelin-star chefs and government officials, This is a kitchen revolutionary who

ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN CUNEO

seems to dash off cooking manifestos at the rate at which other people tweet and who issues the unqualified declarations of a prophet. He is regarded as the founding father of molecular gastronomy, having spent his career pushing science into the kitchen—first to explain traditional cooking, then to dismantle it. He has sent sliced onions through an MRI machine and invented an equation for aioli. He has mummified eggs, unboiled eggs, cooked eggs without heat, and turned hard-boiled eggs transparent.

Now This has staked his reputation on a new way of feeding ourselves that he calls "note-by-note cooking." It involves designing food from pure chemical compounds and is, he argues, an "obvious" approach that will help stave off the energy crisis, eliminate food waste, and end world hunger. Far from protein shakes concocted with chemistry-class staples, the meals This envisions will be made with the same care as mille-feuille or coq au vin, but they will be composed of, say, citric acid, ethanol, and glycerol. Note-by-note recipes call on kitchen essentials like water, oil, and sodium chloride (aka salt) and use classic techniques like frying, broiling, and baking along with molecular-gastronomy methods like dehydration and spherification. Many of the finished dishes resemble creations from El Bullí, the now-closed Catalonian restaurant that put modernist cuisine on the world map, with powders and foams arranged beside brightly colored rectangles of food that could be crunchy or creamy, depending on how they were prepared. Bulk might come from powdered wheat starch instead of pasta; a sauce could be thickened with iota carrageenan, a seaweed extract, in place of heavy cream; liquids are chiefly water and cooking oil; and plates may be dolled up by running combs over whisked piles of pea-protein dough. In time, This says, "the comb will be the ultimate culinary tool."

This had traveled to New York to promote *Note by Note Cooking*, his 23rd book, and was also pitching the annual note-by-note cooking contest, held in Paris. In the NYU classroom, This had people sufficiently rattled that they began interrupting him. The head of a company that makes cricket-flour protein bars raised his hand. He was concerned, he began, that no one knows enough about macro- and micronutrients to use the note-by-note method to re-create—

"Not re-create. Create!," This interjected. The white sludge of egg protein he was mixing was not really a steak, he explained with practiced patience. He does not want to simulate steak—or chicken, or salmon, or pears. He wants to invent new foods that offer new flavors. Calling the mixture "steak" had been a bit of theater to make the abstract concept of note-by-note more familiar. To eliminate confusion, however, he would give the dish a different name: Dirac, in honor of the British theoretical physicist Paul Dirac (This likes naming dishes and sauces after scientists).

"If you have beef and carrot" to work with and nothing more, "you make one mixture," This said. "But if you have the 300 compounds in beef and the 500 in carrots, then the number of combinations is much better and all the possibilities exist! I can make anything! It's the same as electronic music."

This has mummified eggs, unboiled eggs, and turned hard-boiled eggs transparent.

This, who is 60, has diaphanous white hair and the long, soft shape of an éclair. He delivers blunt judgments. "By the way, applied sciences don't exist, but that's another story," he announced after a woman introduced herself as working in the applied sciences. Or: "I have to tell you, note-by-note is already done in many countries, but not in America. And this is sad for you. You are late." As This lectured, he threw his left fist into his right biceps for the "up yours" *bras d'honneur* more often than he paused for water, and answered many questions with an exasperated "But I don't care!"

As the Dirac cooked in the microwave, This outlined his plan for farmers to buy extraction kits—about $5,000 apiece—so they can sell polyphenols instead of produce. These edible powders last forever, This said: farewell, food spoilage. Shipping the pure compounds takes less money and fuel than transporting the sacks of sugar, protein, ash, and water we call tomatoes. Or, he added, homeowners could just save their grass clippings when they mow their lawns. "You could extract the sugar and amino acids and keep them in a box and sell them," This said. "Or eat them!"

This is already feeding himself note by note. On days when he can't leave his lab for lunch, he'll dip into a large sack of powdered plant protein to whip up some of the Dirac that people were just then passing around the lecture hall. His favorite faux wine sauce is a mixture of dissolved grape phenolics, tartaric acid, and water. (From the recipe: "If you like, add a little diacetyl in solution to some oil, then add a drop of 1-octen-3-ol in solution (20 parts per million) to some oil.")

The Dirac eventually reached my seat. The mass of lumpy white proteins clung to a fork with the consistency of scrambled eggs mixed with Elmer's glue. Before I could chew it, the Dirac melted on my tongue, releasing potato and mushroom flavors and a vague aftertaste of Roquefort, but nothing close to sirloin. It felt in the mouth like a sticky Cheez Doodle robbed of its flavoring powder. Considering how snack foods are assembled, Dirac is in many ways the second cousin of the Doodle. The Coca-Cola, Twinkies, and Starbursts being sold at the deli across from NYU's campus are early iterations of note-by-note, assembled, as so many packaged foods are, from chemical compounds that could have come from This's food pantry of the future. They fall short of what This calls "pure note-by-note"—foods made only of compounds that have been fractionated as far as possible—but he acknowledges a likeness.

The Dirac on my plate was a far cry from the note-by-note meals This envisions, which he says should tantalize the tongue. The winners of the 2014 contest, a 21-year-old Belgian medical student named Frédéric Clarembeau and his partner, Elodie Ricquebourg, came closer to this vision with the dish they created, *Palette de saveurs aux notes d'Asie*. Their creation looks from

the photograph posted online as though it could have a place on any Manhattan tasting menu: a soup garnished with cream and saffron threads, accompanied by a meticulous arrangement of grilled bread, fried chicken, and Parmesan crisps. When I spoke with Clarembeau, he explained that the "soup" was freeze-dried coconut extract and gellan gum (a bacteria by-product) presented in two contrasting consistencies: in a hot liquid form, and as a cold whipped cream that wouldn't melt. He had prepared a red garnish by squeezing a jelled soy-sauce mixture from a syringe onto an ice cube, and the "chicken" was really wheat starch, gluten, milk protein, glutamate, and centrifuged carrot fibers pulverized in a coffee grinder and then pan-fried. A caramelized sauce flavored with limonene and geraniol—aromatic chemicals used more often in cosmetics than in cooking—topped off the creation. Clarembeau and Ricquebourg's recipe was judged on feasibility, originality, and flavor complexity, though Clarembeau admitted to me that their dish "wasn't mind-blowing, but it tasted good."

Some in the NYU crowd worried that note-by-note would gut the emotional and cultural role of food. A valid concern, and yet it seemed that the audience had overlooked the *cooking* that is integral to This's plan. The ingredients may be unconventional, but working them into appetizing meals still requires a chef's creativity, not to mention the usual stirring and sautéing. "If cooking were only a matter of technique it would be a very sad thing indeed," This writes in his book. "Cooking is able to transcend mere doing by virtue of the fact that it also has an artistic aspect."

Even if his plan to save the world falls short, note-by-note could—and aims to—give rise to a new kind of culinary experience that moves past the constraints of nature's grocery store. DJs fill clubs by playing synthetic beats that sound nothing like any music made with traditional instruments. So why can't chefs break loose, too?

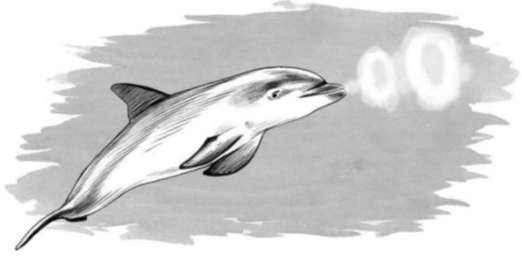
He says his approach will stave off the energy crisis, eliminate food waste, and end world hunger.

The NYU foodies were not entirely sold. "I don't think there's anyone who left the room who was like, 'Wow! I can't wait to have a note-by-note dinner,' " Anne McBride, the adjunct faculty member who'd invited This to speak, told me later.

When people call note-by-note disgusting or a threat to the future of food, This hears only the same objections he received in the 1980s when he preached the gospel of now-standard restaurant techniques and ingredients like sous-vide cooking and hydrocolloids. As with molecular gastronomy, This has started by implanting note-by-note in haute kitchens, hoping the 99 percent will follow. Already, Pierre Gagnaire, a three-Michelin-star chef and This's longtime collaborator, has served note-by-note-style dishes in his restaurants. One Gagnaire dessert, the Chick Corea, uses ascorbic acid, beta-carotene, calcium lactate, centrifuged apple, and other ingredients to create lemon-flavored liquid-filled pearls and cubes of fruit fiber that are served under a brittle green menthol crust. Le Cordon Bleu has hosted dinners to teach This's principles to its up-and-coming gastronomes. And, a few days before visiting NYU, This had pitched Jean-Georges Vongerichten on the idea of a note-by-note café.

"If you give this new food to the king, everybody will want it," This said at NYU, adding that he doesn't care about foodies. It's the meat-and-potatoes folks he's after. Or, as he hopes they will be called, the Dirac people. *A*

Bianca Bosker is the author of Original Copies: Architectural Mimicry in Contemporary China *and a forthcoming book on the extremes of taste.*



VERY SHORT BOOK EXCERPT

THE ULTIMATE DOLPHIN TRICK

In a South African aquarium lived a baby Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphin named Dolly. One day, when she was just six months old, Dolly was watching a trainer standing at the window smoking a cigarette, blowing puffs of smoke. Dolly swam to her mother, briefly suckled, then returned to the window and released a cloud of milk that engulfed her head. The trainer was "absolutely astonished." Dolly didn't "copy" (she wasn't really smoking) or imitate with intent to achieve the same purpose. Somehow Dolly came up with the idea of using milk to represent smoke. Using one thing to represent something else isn't just mimicking. It is art.

—Adapted from *Beyond Words: What Animals Think and Feel*, by Carl Safina (published by Henry Holt in July)

ILLUSTRATION BY JOE McKENDRY

Study of Studies

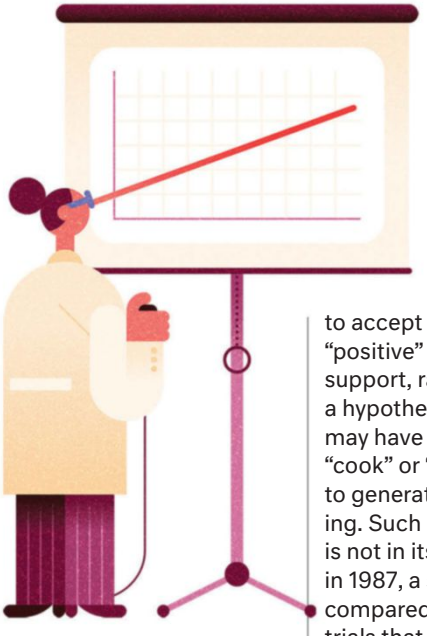
THE NEW SCIENCE OF BAD SCIENCE

What recent research tells us about fraud, errors, and other dismaying problems with—yes—recent research

BY BOURREE LAM

IN MAY, the journal *Science* retracted a much-talked-about study suggesting that gay canvassers might cause same-sex marriage opponents to change their opinion, after an independent statistical analysis revealed irregularities in its data **[1].** The retraction joined a string of science scandals, ranging from Andrew Wakefield's infamous study linking a childhood vaccine and autism to the allegations that Marc Hauser, once a star psychology professor at Harvard, fabricated data for research on animal cognition. By one estimate, from 2001 to 2010, the annual rate of retractions by academic journals increased by a factor of 11 (adjusting for increases in published literature, and excluding articles by repeat offenders) **[2].** This surge raises an obvious question: Are retractions increasing because errors and other misdeeds are becoming more common, or because research is now scrutinized more closely? Helpfully, some scientists have taken to conducting studies *of* retracted studies, and their work sheds new light on the situation.

"Retractions are born of many mothers," write Ivan Oransky and Adam Marcus, the co-founders of the blog Retraction Watch, which has logged thousands of retractions in the past five years. A study in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* reviewed 2,047 retractions of biomedical and life-sciences articles and found that just 21.3 percent stemmed from straightforward error, while 67.4 percent resulted from misconduct, including fraud or suspected fraud (43.4 percent) and plagiarism (9.8 percent) **[3].**



Surveys of scientists have tried to gauge the extent of undiscovered misconduct. According to a 2009 meta-analysis of these surveys, about 2 percent of scientists admitted to having fabricated, falsified, or modified data or results at least once, and as many as a third confessed "a variety of other questionable research practices including 'dropping data points based on a gut feeling,' and 'changing the design, methodology or results of a study in response to pressures from a funding source'" **[4].**

As for why these practices are so prevalent, many scientists blame increased competition for academic jobs and research funding, combined with a "publish or perish" culture. Because journals are more likely to accept studies reporting "positive" results (those that support, rather than refute, a hypothesis), researchers may have an incentive to "cook" or "mine" their data to generate a positive finding. Such publication bias is not in itself news—back in 1987, a study found that, compared with research trials that went unpublished, those that were published were three times as likely to have positive results **[5].** But the bias does seem to be getting stronger: a more recent study of 4,600 research papers found that from 1990 to 2007, the proportion of positive results grew by 22 percent **[6].**

Of course, rising retraction rates also reflect the fact that scientists, journalists, and amateur watchdogs have begun scrutinizing research more closely. New data-analysis tools play a part, as does plagiarism-detecting software **[7].** So do a number of ambitious recent efforts to replicate findings—with dismaying results. In 2012, a researcher then at the biotechnology company Amgen wrote in *Nature* that when his team tried to reproduce 53 landmark cancer studies, they could replicate just six **[8].** And according to a news report in *Nature*, a project aiming to reproduce the findings of 100 psychology papers has managed to replicate results for only 39 of them (the project's findings are still under peer review) **[9].**

This heightened scrutiny—the very scrutiny that likely contributed to the retractions surge in the first place—could help reverse the tide, by providing a powerful disincentive to bad behavior. As more scientific misconduct is exposed and shamed, researchers who were previously tempted to play fast and loose with their data may now think twice. *A*

THE STUDIES:

[1] McNutt, "Retraction of LaCour and Green" (*Science*, June 2015)
[2] Grieneisen and Zhang, "A Comprehensive Survey of Retracted Articles From the Scholarly Literature" (*PLOS One*, Oct. 2012)
[3] Fang et al., "Misconduct Accounts for the Majority of Retracted Scientific Publications" (*Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, Oct. 2012)
[4] Fanelli, "How Many Scientists Fabricate and Falsify Research?" (*PLOS One*, May 2009)
[5] Dickersin et al., "Publication Bias and Clinical Trials" (*Controlled Clinical Trials*, Dec. 1987)
[6] Fanelli, "Negative Results Are Disappearing From Most Disciplines and Countries" (*Scientometrics*, Sept. 2011)
[7] Giles, "Special Report: Taking on the Cheats" (*Nature*, May 2005)
[8] Begley and Ellis, "Drug Development: Raise Standards for Preclinical Cancer Research" (*Nature*, March 2012)
[9] Baker, "First Results From Psychology's Largest Reproducibility Test" (*Nature*, April 2015)

ILLUSTRATION BY ROBIN DAVEY



Business

HOW THE BANKERS STAYED OUT OF JAIL

The probes into bank fraud leading up to the crash have been quietly closed. Has justice been done?

BY WILLIAM D. COHAN

On May 27, in her first major prosecutorial act as the new U.S. attorney general, Loretta Lynch unsealed a 47-count indictment against nine FIFA officials and another five corporate executives. She was passionate about their wrongdoing. "The indictment alleges corruption that is rampant, systemic, and deep-rooted both abroad and here in the United States," she said. "Today's action makes clear that this Department of Justice intends to end any such corrupt practices, to root out misconduct, and to bring wrongdoers to justice."

Lost in the hoopla surrounding the event was a depressing fact. Lynch and her predecessor, Eric Holder, appear to have turned the page on a more relevant vein of wrongdoing: the profligate and dishonest behavior of Wall Street bankers, traders, and executives in the years leading up to the 2008 financial crisis. How we arrived at a place where Wall Street misdeeds go virtually unpunished while soccer executives in Switzerland get arrested is murky at best. But the legal window for punishing Wall Street bankers for fraudulent actions that contributed to the 2008 crash has just about closed. It seems an apt time to ask: In the biggest picture, what justice has been achieved?

Since 2009, 49 financial institutions have paid various government entities and private plaintiffs nearly $190 billion in fines and settlements, according to an analysis by the investment bank Keefe, Bruyette & Woods. That may seem like a big number, but the money has come from shareholders, not individual bankers. (Settlements were levied on corporations, not specific employees, and paid out as corporate expenses—in some cases, tax-deductible ones.) In early 2014, just weeks after Jamie Dimon, the CEO of JPMorgan Chase, settled out of court with the Justice Department, the bank's board of directors gave him a 74 percent raise, bringing his salary to $20 million.

The more meaningful number is how many Wall Street executives have gone to jail for playing a part in the crisis. That number is one. (Kareem Serageldin, a senior trader at Credit Suisse, is serving a 30-month sentence for inflating the value of mortgage bonds in his trading portfolio, allowing them to appear more valuable than they really were.) By way of contrast, following the savings-and-loan crisis of the 1980s, more than 1,000 bankers of all stripes were jailed for their transgressions.

At an event at the National Press Club last February, Holder said the virtual absence of convictions (or even prosecutions) this time around did not result from a want of trying. "These are the kinds of cases that people come to the Justice Department to make," he said. "The inability to make them, at least to this point, has not been as a result of a lack of effort." Preet Bharara, the U.S. attorney for the Southern District of New York, made a similar argument to me. The evidence, he said, does not show clear misconduct by individuals. It's possible that Bharara is correct about that: Wall Street bankers make it their daily business to figure out ways to abide by the letter of the law while violating its spirit. And to be sure, much of the behavior that led to the crisis involved recklessness and poor judgment, not fraud. But even so, in light of various whistle-blower allegations—and the size of the settlements agreed to by the banks themselves—this explanation strains credulity. The Justice Department's ethos regarding Wall Street, and the *way* the department went about its business, appear to be a large part of the story.

Any narrative of how we got to this point has to start with the so-called Holder Doctrine, a June 1999 memorandum written by the then–deputy attorney general warning of the dangers of prosecuting big banks—a variant of the "too big to fail" argument that has since become so familiar. Holder's memo asserted that "collateral consequences" from prosecutions—including corporate instability or collapse—should be taken into account when deciding whether to prosecute a big financial institution. That sentiment was echoed as late as 2012 by Lanny

ILLUSTRATION BY MATT CHASE

Breuer, then the head of the Justice Department's criminal division, who said in a speech at the New York City Bar Association that he felt it was his duty to consider the health of the company, the industry, and the markets in deciding whether or not to file charges.

In the aftermath of the crash, the Justice Department did not refrain from prosecutions altogether. In 2009, the U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of New York tried two Bear Stearns hedge-fund managers—Ralph Cioffi and Matthew Tannin—who had effectively run their $1.6 billion fund into the ground in the spring of 2007, an event that many believe was the canary in the coal mine of the financial crisis. But a jury acquitted the two men in November 2009. Added to the general fear that the economy was extraordinarily fragile, the unexpected acquittal seemed to put a deep freeze on Wall Street prosecutions for close to three years.

A serious national investigation of the practices of Wall Street's pre-crash mortgage-banking activities did not begin in earnest until mid-2012—at least five years after the worst of the bad behavior had occurred—following President Obama's call to action in the State of the Union address that January and the issuance of subpoenas to Wall Street's biggest banks. The five-year statute of limitations for ordinary criminal fraud charges had passed while the Justice Department dithered, but civil prosecution of banks and individual bankers, which has a 10-year statute of limitations under a particular banking law, was still a possibility. Holder gave his various U.S. attorneys around the country responsibility for investigating.

A team led by Benjamin Wagner, the U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of California, investigated alleged wrongdoing at JPMorgan Chase, for instance. In many ways, Wagner's investigation was typical of the Justice Department's approach: hoover up hundreds of thousands of pages of e-mails and documents, interview current and former employees about their business practices, and use the findings as a cudgel to extract a financial settlement. Wagner and his team drafted—but did not file—a complaint against the firm in September 2013 that reportedly detailed how JPMorgan Chase itself (not merely Bear Stearns or Washington Mutual, two banks that it bought at the height of the crisis) knowingly packaged shoddy mortgages into securities that did not meet its credit standards and then sold them off to investors. As part of its investigation, Wagner's team had deposed Alayne Fleischmann, a JPMorgan Chase banker turned whistle-blower, who'd told the team about what was going on. She had also detailed how, before the crash, her warnings about continuing to package up the bad mortgages into securities and sell them off as investments had gone unheeded by her superiors. After sharing her concerns with her boss in a 13-page letter, Fleischmann had been marginalized and then fired. (Disclosure: JPMorgan Chase also fired me, as a managing director, in 2004, and I am in litigation with the bank resulting from a soured investment I made in 1999.)

In November 2013, as part of a deal that kept Wagner's complaint from becoming public—and the specifics of Fleischmann's revelations from being widely disseminated—JPMorgan Chase agreed to a $13 billion settlement with various federal and state agencies, then the largest of its kind. Holder heralded the settlement as an important moment of accountability for Wall Street. But extracting large settlements paid with shareholders' money is not the same as bringing alleged wrongdoers to justice. Instead of presenting a detailed picture of JPMorgan Chase's misdeeds—as would have happened had Wagner's complaint been filed and the matter adjudicated in court—the government and the bank negotiated an anodyne 11-page "Statement of Facts" that glossed over many of the details of the behavior Fleischmann was trying to stop, and did not name any JPMorgan Chase bankers.

After the savings-and-loan crisis of the 1980s, more than 1,000 bankers were jailed.

The Justice Department reached agreements with other Wall Street banks, among them Citigroup and Bank of America, using a similar playbook: Threaten public disclosure of behavior that looks criminal and then, in exchange for keeping it sealed, extract a huge financial settlement. No one individual, or group of individuals, is held accountable. No predawn raids of Park Avenue apartments are made. No one gets arrested. No one gets publicly shamed.

In February, shortly before Lynch succeeded him, Holder gave federal attorneys and their staffs a deadline: they had 90 days to bring any new prosecutions against individual bankers, traders, or executives on Wall Street before probes against them would be closed. That deadline came and went in May. Lynch, since her elevation, has been largely silent about Wall Street misconduct leading up to the crash; certainly she's said nothing, in a major public forum, that's comparable to the zeal and determination she expressed in her statement about bringing FIFA executives to justice. But in fairness, it's not clear how much she could do anyway: the peak of bad behavior on Wall Street seemed to occur in 2005 and 2006, about 10 years ago, meaning the statute of limitations is just about up. And new cases take time to make.

Holder, meanwhile, along with his old colleague Lanny Breuer, has returned to the white-shoe law firm that he left in order to join the Justice Department—Covington & Burling, which counts among its clients Bank of America, Citigroup, and Wells Fargo. (The firm reportedly kept his office for him.) The sums Holder exacted from Wall Street banks earned him plenty of praise in the media. But without holding real people on Wall Street accountable for their wrongdoing in the years leading up to the financial crisis, the message that their behavior was unacceptable goes undelivered. Instead a very different message is being sent: for financiers, justice is just a check someone else has to write.

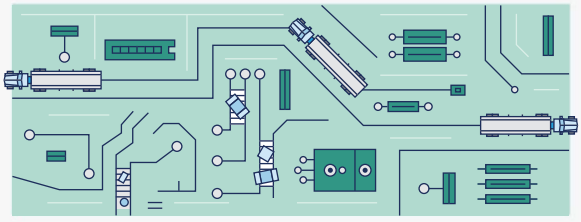
William D. Cohan is the author of three books on Wall Street and, most recently, of The Price of Silence.

BOLD BETS

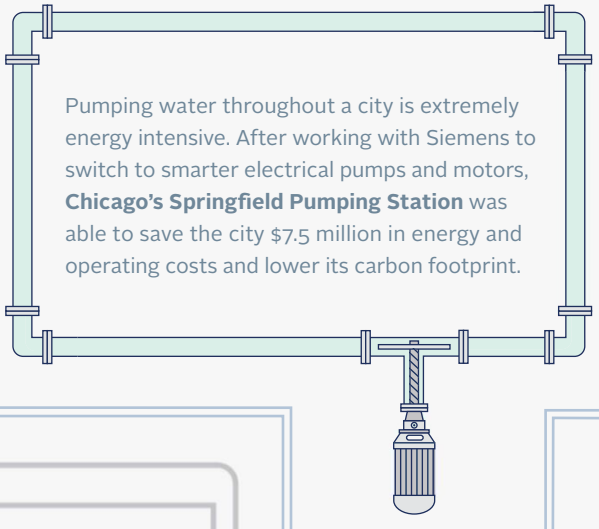
THE GREAT INFRASTRUCTURE MIGRATION

CITIES ACROSS THE COUNTRY ARE GOING DIGITAL. Some are focused on getting smarter, solving old problems with new solutions by investing in digital infrastructures, such as traffic-reading street-lights, alongside more traditional ones, such as roads and bridges. Others are focused on growing their economies with new technologies and innovative public-private partnerships. These changes come with up-front costs, of course, but "when you spend on this transition," says Eric Spiegel, president and CEO of Siemens USA, "you get a multiplier effect that boosts productivity and attractiveness for investment."

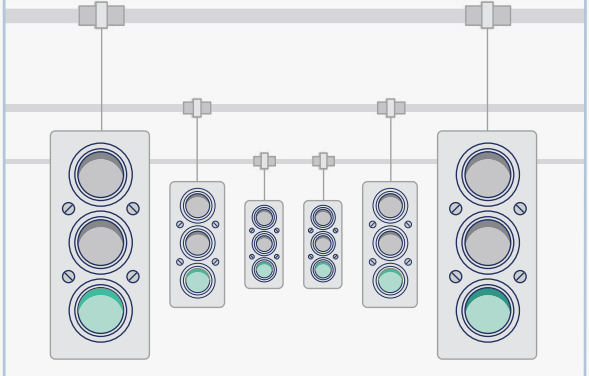
EXPLORE A SAMPLING OF CITIES AND INNOVATIONS THAT ARE RAISING THE BAR FOR THE 21ST CENTURY.



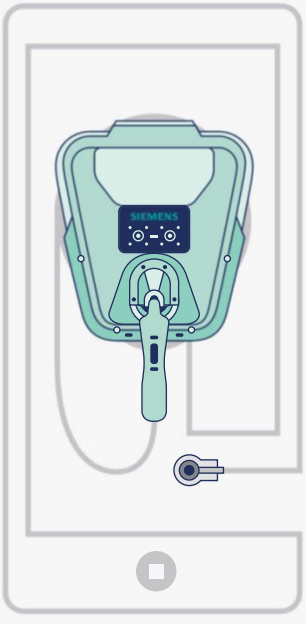
Siemens recently made an in-kind grant of PLM software valued at $440 million to Youngstown State University, which will be used by students at **America Makes**, a manufacturing innovation hub and public-private partnership devoted to integrating 3D printing and other cutting-edge technologies into mainstream manufacturing.



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Technology

THINKING OUTSIDE THE CUBE

How offices will change—for better and for worse

BY OLGA KHAZAN

THE OFFICE OF THE FUTURE probably won't look like something out of *The Jetsons*, with levitating desks and workers who communicate telepathically. But it could resemble a different fictional realm. "It's going to look a lot more like Harry Potter," says Ben Waber, the co-founder of Humanyze, a start-up that focuses on "people analytics" (more on that later).

What he means is that offices will appear much as they do today—only with a few magical flourishes here and there. Harry Potter's world still has staircases, after all, but ones that can move themselves around the building. Similarly, Waber predicts that the white-collar workers of, say, 2030 will commute to normal-looking offices and sip coffee at normal-looking desks. But the company's espresso machine might, for example, be programmed to find the two teams that need to collaborate on a project and roll itself into position so that those workers will get up and spitball ideas over cappuccinos.

That's just Waber's prediction, of course, but it jibes with the thinking of others I recently interviewed, including architects, designers, researchers, and entrepreneurs. Office furniture and gadgets will watch what we do and, in some cases, report back to the boss. Robots will patrol corporate campuses. Desks will automatically reconfigure themselves. And companies will use technology to get employees to talk with one another—as well as to stay focused amidst all the chatter.

1 A "Natural" Environment

Exposure to nature has been shown to lift spirits and reduce stress in a variety of settings. The office is no exception: workers who regularly get a glimpse of greenery have been found to have better attention spans and higher job satisfaction. Alas, few offices are situated in a peaceful woodland. Many of us, in fact, toil beneath fluorescent lights and air vents that crank out arctic breezes.

Some companies are trying to make the office at least *feel* more natural. Amazon's new headquarters in Seattle will have three biospheres—greenhouse-like domes filled with plants and five stories of flexible work spaces—and earlier this year Google proposed a headquarters expansion that would have included indoor bike paths, plentiful flora, and a translucent roof. (The Mountain View, California, city council nixed the plan, awarding most of the land to LinkedIn instead.) Companies with more-modest budgets are opting to install wallpaper and carpeting that mimic patterns found in nature or build "green walls"—essentially vertical gardens.

Offices may begin to sound like the natural world, too. Many open-plan offices already pump in white noise to provide privacy and minimize distractions, but researchers at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, in Troy, New York, found that people prefer the sound of flowing water to white noise, and that the more natural sound is just as good for concentration.

Uncomfortable office temperatures are another known productivity killer. Chu Foxlin, a senior interior architect with Tsoi/Kobus & Associates, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, told me that companies are installing systems that give employees more control over the temperature in their work spaces.

2 The Automatic Office

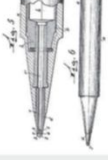
Researchers at the MIT Media Lab are developing office furniture that

A Brief Chronicle of Offices

Early 1800s: The word *counting*house begins to be replaced by the word *office*.



1873: Remington typewriters are introduced. They popularize the QWERTY keyboard.



1938: Frustrated by the slow-drying ink of fountain pens, a Hungarian journalist invents the ballpoint pen.

History 1800 1900 1925

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could, with the help of sensors, wheels, and motors, transform as the needs of workers shift throughout the day. A desk could expand to become a conference table, and walls could descend from the ceiling to create a meeting space. Furniture could sync with a calendar or with a wearable device that could tell, for instance, that an employee has been sitting for too long.

"Maybe our two desks should get together and create a room for us," Hasier Larrea, an engineer at the lab, told me. "And as soon as that meeting is over, why do we need to have a room? Could we open that room and create a socializing space?" Perhaps most appealing for budget-conscious businesses, mutable furnishings could be crammed into a much smaller area than traditional office configurations require.

Office workers may also have to get used to having robots in their midst. Knightscope, a start-up in Mountain View, has created a robot called K5 to serve as a "front-line guardian"—a nonhuman security guard. Using sensors and cameras, it can detect anomalous human behavior and beam a warning back to a command center. Meanwhile, a Canadian company called Avidbots is building robots that clean commercial spaces using laser mapping and coordinate their efforts with swarm-like communications.

3 Productive Collisions

Ever since Steve Jobs arranged Pixar's offices around a central atrium so that employees would run into one another, CEOs in Silicon Valley and beyond have been obsessed with fostering opportunities for spontaneous brainstorming. Facebook's new headquarters is reportedly the world's largest open-plan work space, and Tony Hsieh, the CEO of Zappos, talks often about "collisionable hours"—the amount of time people spend circulating and, ideally, exchanging ideas.

Humanyze, Ben Waber's people-analytics company, aims to help companies engineer such collisions. It furnishes workers with ID badges equipped with microphones and accelerometers. The badges keep track of employees' interactions, measuring things like speaking volume and tone of voice, and then feed anonymized data back to the mother ship. That way, a company can determine whether moving its programmers closer to its designers actually improves teamwork, or whether Friday happy hours are a good way to get employees from different departments to cross-pollinate. Currently, more than 10,000 Humanyze badges roam the wild, eavesdropping on office matters large and small.

4 Your Desk Is Watching You

The Humanyze badges are part of a larger (and rather disconcerting) trend toward office equipment that can spy on workers. Another example: VoloMetrix, a people-analytics software program that helps companies monitor how efficiently their employees communicate. It extracts calendar appointments and e-mails from employees' computers, anonymizes the information, and looks to see whether those check-ins boost the bottom line.

One of VoloMetrix's services is a personal dashboard that shows employees how much of other people's time they consume by sending e-mails or holding meetings. The tool attempts to estimate how efficient each meeting is, based on measures like how many people attend and how many e-mails are sent during the gathering—a sign of low engagement. The dashboards reportedly free up an average of about two hours a week for each employee.

Even our chairs can monitor us. A seat cushion called the Darma promises to use fiber-optic sensors to track the sitter's heart rate, posture, breathing, and other vitals. Based on those signals, an accompanying smartphone app reminds the person to take a break or stand for a spell. The company that makes the Darma plans to begin shipping cushions this year. Steelcase, an office-furniture company, is considering incorporating the technology into one of its chairs.

5 Privacy in an Open Office

Open-plan offices seem here to stay, despite the fact that studies have found they contribute to high stress and blood pressure. Still, the moans of introverts haven't gone completely unheard: some employers have realized that workers occasionally need privacy, and are building areas for sensitive conversations or independent work. After a group of scientists complained to Chu Foxlin, the Cambridge architect, about distracting office noise, for example, she proposed installing isolation cones—made of felt and large enough to work inside—that would hang from the ceiling to about three feet from the floor.

Steelcase is introducing a brightly colored pod called the Brody Worklounge. It's a lounge-style chair with a privacy screen that wraps around the worker, entombing him or her in a cocoon of privacy and, one hopes, productivity. To provide a little seclusion at long group tables, Steelcase makes foot-tall desk dividers. In the future, the company may add a technology that would allow the dividers to change, with the flick of a switch, from translucent to opaque red, a newfangled DO NOT DISTURB sign.

Brian Heffron, a partner at a Boston marketing firm where most employees sit together at large tables, is skeptical that such gentle signals work. For a while, employees at his firm tried putting up flags or action figures to indicate that they didn't want to be interrupted. "It never seemed to work," he says. "If someone needs help immediately, they just tended to ask for it." That's one reason the company created quiet rooms with doors. Even for the most gregarious of workers, it seems, sometimes hell is (a communal workbench shared with) other people.





1968: The designer Robert Propst invents the precursor to the cubicle. Three decades later, he will denounce the cubicle's overuse as "monolithic insanity."

1971: The first e-mail is sent.

1999: The movie *Office Space* pokes fun at the absurdities of cubicle life.

2015

2050: Acoustic engineers solve the noise problem in open offices. (But robots have by now replaced many workers anyway.)

1950 | 1975 | 2000 | Predictions | 2050

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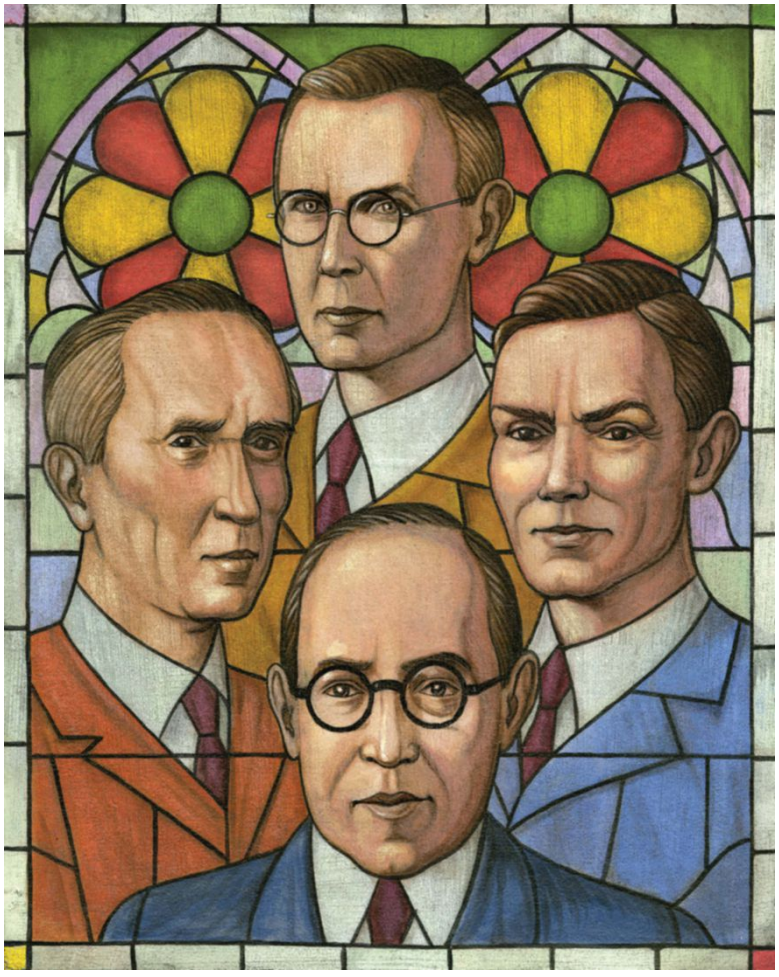
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The CULTURE FILE

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The Myth Makers

How J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, and their fellow Inklings brought grandeur to the modern age

By JAMES PARKER

IN THIS NEARLY MAGICAL ROOM, amid fire-crackle and clink of glass, you can hear them talking. Pipe smoke is in the air, and a certain boisterous chauvinism, and the wet-dog smell of recently rained-on tweed. You can hear the donnish mumbles of J. R. R. Tolkien as the slow coils of *The Silmarillion* glint and shift in his back-brain. Now he's reading aloud from an interminable marmalade-stained manuscript, and his fellow academic Hugo Dyson, prone on the couch, is heckling him: "Oh God, not another fucking elf!" You can hear the challenging train-conductor baritone of C. S. Lewis, familiar to millions from his wartime radio broadcasts; hear the unstoppable spiel of the writer/hierophant Charles Williams, with his twitchy limbs and angel-monkey face; hear the silver stream of ideas and argumentation that is the philosopher Owen Barfield. They are intellectually bent upon one another, these men, but flesh-and-blood is the thing: conviviality is, for them, a kind of passion. The chairs are deep; the fire glows gold and extra fiery in the grate. Lewis's brother, Warnie, rosy with booze and fellow feeling, serves the drinks. And the walls drop away, and the scene extends itself backwards and forward in time ...

Philip and Carol Zaleski's *The Fellowship: The Literary Lives of the Inklings* is a mental map, a religious journey, and the biography of a brotherhood. Plenty of distinguished Inklings came and went over the years, padding across the carpets with a Warnie-provided drink in hand, but the Zaleskis zoom in on (and out from) the primary axis of Tolkien, Lewis, Williams, and Barfield, the four among whom the invisible correspondences of thought and affection were strongest. Christians all, these men formed what the Zaleskis call "a perfect compass rose of faith": Barfield the proto–New Ager, Tolkien the rather prim orthodox Catholic, Lewis the noisy and dogmatically ordinary layman and popular theologian, Williams the ritualistic Anglican with a taste for sorcery.

"The qualifications ... are a tendency to write, and Christianity." Thus explained Lewis in a letter to Williams in March 1936, inviting him to a session of the "informal club" that had begun convening every Thursday night in his rooms at Oxford's Magdalen College (and then again, still less formally, at the Eagle & Child pub on Tuesday mornings). The letter was a fan letter; the two men didn't know each other, but Lewis had found himself compelled to inform Williams that reading his fantasy novel *The Place of the Lion*—in which comfy England is burst upon by unruly celestial essences—had been "one of the major literary events of my life."

● *Clockwise from top:* Charles Williams, Owen Barfield, C. S. Lewis, and J. R. R. Tolkien

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My wife and I took a trip for some night photography. In between all the photos, we were able to take some quick naps in our Subaru. It's nice to have a reliable friend that's always there for our adventures…and a little sleep. – Win O., Portland, OR.

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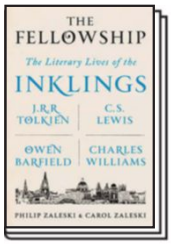
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Lewis was an Oxford fellow and tutor in English literature, and a relatively fresh-baked believer: after an arduous wrangle of a conversion, he had arrived at the knowledge of a personal God while sitting in Warnie's sidecar on a motorcycle ride to Whipsnade Zoo. Williams worked in publishing, wrote feverishly, smoked like a chimney, delivered whirling literary-metaphysical lectures, and indulged in the overheated cultivation of female disciples. (One such pupil, we learn from the Zaleskis, was struck smartly on the bottom with a ruler.) Devoutly churchgoing, he was also of high rank in at least one esoteric mystical order and would make sacred signs while traveling on the London Underground. W. H. Auden thought him nearly a saint. To Lewis's letter, Williams replied immediately that he had been on the verge of writing to Lewis, in praise of his *The Allegory of Love*. "It has never before happened to me to be admiring an author of a book while he at the same time was admiring me." (Not a bad example of the loopy Williams prose style, that.) The serendipity, the crossbeams of appreciation, the ardent encounter at the aesthetic, soon to be spiritual, level—a very Inklings moment.

And so it began, and so it went on, with additions and diminutions, until the late '40s. Reading aloud and commenting upon unfinished work was the group's primary activity. Lewis's *The Great Divorce*, Williams's *All Hallows' Eve*, and—most resonantly for us—Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* all made their debut in this context. Tolkien, like Lewis, was part of the fabric of Oxford University, a philologist and a professor of Anglo-Saxon, teaching *Beowulf* by day while tinkering at night, at home, with his own made-up languages. *Tinkering* is of course quite the wrong word: Tolkien was plunging, spelunking, delving, excavating, as pickax-happy as a dwarf in the Mines of Moria, because in the roots of language—the glowing word-cores, the *namings*—he had found the roots of story. "For perfect construction of an art-language," he explained in a talk delivered in 1931, "it is found necessary to construct at least in outline a mythology." And there it is: the DNA of *The Lord of the Rings*. It was at this level of thinking that Tolkien met the way-ahead-of-the-curve Barfield, for whom language contained "the inner, living history of man's soul." Barfield's brilliant 1926 book, *History in English Words*, is a work of philosophical archaeology, tracking and illuminating, via the changing meanings of words, the development of Western mental reality. And for Barfield, all reality was mental reality. "When we study long-term *changes* in consciousness," he stated unequivocally, "we are studying changes in the world itself ... Consciousness is not a tiny bit of the world stuck on the rest of it. It is the inside of the whole world." (In Barfield's old age, his theories would gain him a notable acolyte in Saul Bellow.)

Tolkien revived in us an appetite for myth, for the earth-tremor of Deep Story.



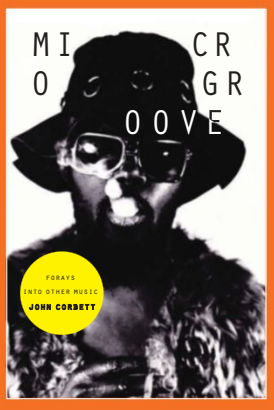
THE FELLOWSHIP: THE LITERARY LIVES OF THE INKLINGS: J. R. R. TOLKIEN, C. S. LEWIS, OWEN BARFIELD, CHARLES WILLIAMS
PHILIP ZALESKI AND CAROL ZALESKI
FSG

We think of the Inklings as traditionalists, red faces scowling upon modernity. Lewis, in particular, polemicized fruitily against materialism, atheism, 20th-century-man-ism. On the other hand, what more modernist project could there be than Tolkien's "construction of an art-language," with the obsessive completeness of its declensions and long-dead kings? Blown sky-high—just like the modernists—by the psychic rupture of the Great War, the Inklings responded not with fragmentation and pessimism but with a redoubled commitment to the world behind the world, freshly visible through this new rip in the fabric. The "intersection of the timeless / With time," T. S. Eliot called it, and one feels it in the music of the dwarfs that sweeps Bilbo Baggins "away into dark lands under strange moons"; in the "potentialities beyond all knowledge" that bulge and scurry in Williams's novels; in Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters*, that extraordinarily modern primer in everyday spiritual warfare, wherein the devil gets just as personal as God; in what Barfield saw in the shape of the cross, "this intersection of time and eternity, the horizontal and the vertical."

Who can compare with these writers? In the intensity of their communion, their accelerating effect upon one another, and their impact on posterity, their only real 20th-century rivals are the Beats. And the Inklings would have detested the Beats. Nonetheless, the two core groups can be mapped onto each other with weird precision: Tolkien would be Kerouac, sensitive maker of legends; Lewis, the broad-shouldered preacher-communicator, would be Allen Ginsberg; Charles Williams, kinky magus, would *have* to be William Burroughs; and the sagacious and durable Owen Barfield, Gary Snyder. (The Inklings had no Neal Cassady, no rogue inspirational sex idol—they were all too grown-up for that.)

But the Beats, bless them, consumed the greater portion of their own energies, with the result that their influence went mainly into rock and roll and advertising, and stayed there. The Inklings, on the other hand, are still gathering steam. Tolkien revived in us an appetite for myth, for the earth-tremor of Deep Story. (See: *Game of Thrones*, and the pancultural howls of pain at the death of Jon Snow.) Lewis invented Narnia—though the exacting Tolkien regarded it as an incoherent mythology—and he may be, write the Zaleskis, "the bestselling Christian writer since John Bunyan." As for Williams and Barfield, they hang in the tingling future: for the former I prophesy an H. P. Lovecraft–style cult (with creepy folk music), and for the latter, cosmic vindication. And Warnie serves another round of drinks, and the Inklings, huffing and puffing and hurtling through time and space in their armchairs, have their victory. *A*

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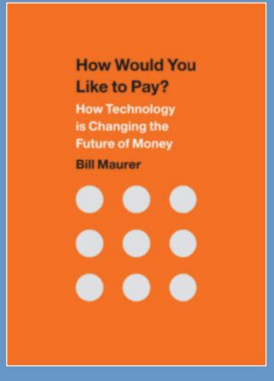
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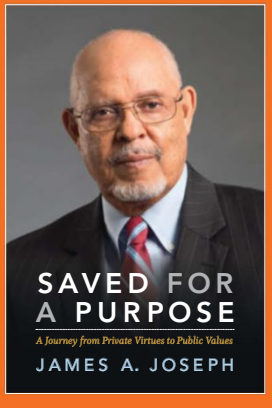
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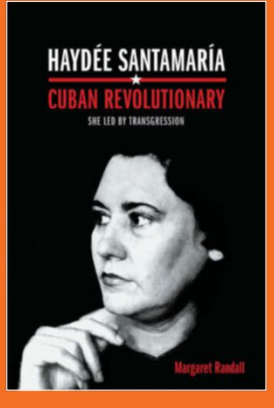
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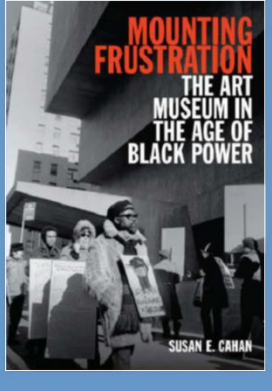
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/ BOOKS /

Jonathan Franzen Strikes Again

His latest satiric targets: Web sleuths and feminists.

By CALEB CRAIN

For a number of years now, Jonathan Franzen has forsworn the most obvious ways of showing off intellect in fiction. In "Perchance to Dream," an essay published in *Harper's* in 1996, he wrote of giving up what he called "the burden of newsbringing"—the duty that he had formerly felt to instruct readers about what was wrong with their world. And in "Mr. Difficult," an essay published in *The New Yorker* in 2002, he disavowed formal experimentation, asserting that novels ought to be "conservative and conventional" and should aspire to induce feelings of "pleasure and connection" in a democratic audience.

Despite these renunciations, however, Franzen's prose is alive with intelligence, and on the first page of his new novel, *Purity*, a reader can see his mind at work on a task at which he excels: showing the way people think. He's introducing one of his protagonists, Purity Tyler, a 23-year-old who goes by the nickname Pip. Here's how he represents her consciousness as she reflects on her ambivalence toward her rather needy mother:

> It wasn't as if Pip felt good about making fun of her mother. But their dealings were all tainted by *moral hazard*, a useful phrase she'd learned in college economics. She was like a bank too big in her mother's economy to fail, an employee too indispensable to be fired for bad attitude.

The flow of the sentences is loose and comfortable; the tone is self-deprecating but also a bit puzzled. Pip realizes that she doesn't altogether understand why she's cruel to her mother. She seems a little embarrassed that in her attempt to explain herself to herself, she has reached for *moral hazard*, a term of art in economics, which might sound pretentious. In fact, the term isn't particularly recherché these days, as Franzen unobtrusively reminds the reader with an allusion to the origins of the Great Recession. One likes Pip for seeming a little modest about using the phrase—for clarifying, somewhat abashedly, that she learned it in economics class—and one likes Franzen for letting her use it anyway. He hasn't condescended to her. He has allowed her to be as smart as most of his readers probably are, and as well read and as curious about the world. What's being shown off here is the ability, native in almost everyone, to notice a clever idea, latch on to it, and then try it out later in a new context that may at first seem a little inappropriate. This is how thinking happens.

Pip describes the process to herself with a simile that adds another layer of complexity: "Her mind was like a balloon with static cling, attracting random ideas as they floated by." Pip isn't always conscious, in other words, of having made an effort or a choice to gather the ideas lodged in her head, even though she acknowledges that some kind of energy inside her must have been responsible for drawing them to her. There's a disconcerting implication here, which Franzen works to bring to the surface in the pages that follow: If our tools for thinking are ideas and phrases devised by other people—as, in an age of social media and ambient television, they increasingly are—then we may face a struggle to know whether our minds are really our own. Some of us might not want the bother.

Pip does want the bother, perhaps because she's aware that she knows less about herself than people in general do. Her mother broke off contact with her family before Pip was born, and Pip hasn't been able to persuade her to reveal the truth about her past or the identity of Pip's father. Pip doesn't even know the name her mother was given at birth. Pip's own life is in disarray. She's burdened with $130,000 in student loans, lives in a squatter house in Oakland, and works for a company that fleeces energy consumers with misleading environmental rhetoric. Like her Dickensian original, she has the idea that if she were to discover her own backstory, something wonderful might happen—maybe even the zeroing-out of those student loans.



A German woman passing through Pip's squat has a proposal for her. The woman is affiliated with a clearinghouse for Internet leaks, run by a charismatic former East German named Andreas Wolf, a Julian Assange–like figure. She suggests that an internship at the organization's headquarters in Bolivia might teach Pip how to search the dark corners of the Web and perhaps pierce her mother's pseudonymity. Pip is skeptical. Not until two romantic overtures of hers go terribly wrong does she become fuzzy-minded enough to consider the offer, and even then, she backs into

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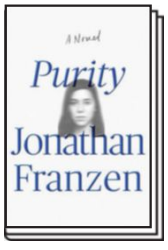
the job by first sending the guru Andreas a challenging e-mail: "Is this like a sex opportunity for you, or what? Do you guys have a keg of Kool-Aid?"

As risk assessment goes, this is about as effective as asking the wolf in Grandmother's bed about its sharp teeth, but Pip isn't thinking clearly. Franzen has always been fond of putting his characters into a psychic distress so disorienting that they make decisions that topple them into even greater psychic distress. In his first novel, *The Twenty-Seventh City* (1988), a female police chief in St. Louis called this vicious circle "the State" and conspired to induce it in the city's leaders, in the hope of furthering a real-estate scheme of hers. In his recent novels, Franzen has done the conspiring himself, from behind the authorial curtain. Whereas the police chief had to rely on henchmen, Franzen the novelist has been able to tap predatory lending, literary theory, pharmaceutical advertising, global warming, disinhibited sexuality, and war profiteering—all the forces of modernity.

The pratfalls remain just as entertaining, and the sadism has now taken on the coloration of satire. In *The Corrections* (2001), for example, Chip Lambert tumbles from a professorship to an intoxicated weekend in bed with a student to psychological overinvestment in a wretched screenplay to theft of groceries, and he keeps on tumbling, like Wile E. Coyote ricocheting down the sides of a canyon, all the way to rock bottom, scraping off, in successive bumps, his professorial priggishness, his sexual dignity, and his writerly vanity, until, by the end, he has lost almost all his defenses against the world. It's wildly enjoyable, as other people's comeuppances usually are.

The State has become the hallmark of Franzen's fiction, and in *Purity*, almost all the characters are in it almost all the time. The upside: the experience of reading *Purity* is as propulsive as that of reading *The Corrections* and *Freedom* (2010). The downside: there's a certain sameness to the experience of reading all three novels. The characters in *Purity* may be new, but their sardonic, harried, going-for-broke attitude is familiar, and once again they're wrestling with some of the most inflammatory topics of the day. (Franzen, it turns out, can't resist "newsbringing.")

The pratfalls remain entertaining, and the sadism has now taken on the coloration of satire.



PURITY
JONATHAN FRANZEN
FSG

Andreas Wolf falls into the State in the late 1980s, when he meets a troubled young woman whose stepfather is blackmailing her with family secrets to extract sexual favors. Andreas's thinking grows muddy, perhaps because he has been sleeping with teenage girls himself, and he persuades her to let him kill the stepfather. He degenerates further once he realizes that he isn't going to be caught and punished: he goes from mocking the East German regime to feeling a confused, pitying identification with it, in a sort of necrosis of the conscience. Not long after the Berlin Wall falls, he visits the secret police's headquarters with the aim of stealing evidence about himself, and he gets past the archive's guards by holding forth to a television crew about the dawn of a new era of transparency.

By the time Pip meets Andreas, the falsity of the face he shows the world has become almost perfect. Secretly, he hates the Internet as much as he hates the state socialism he grew up with, thinking of both as totalitarian, by which he means "impossible to opt out of." In public he inveighs cynically against government surveillance, while in private he acknowledges that the true overlords of the Internet are those at corporations like Google and Facebook who control the surveillance of their millions of users. When whistle-blowers inside Google offer him leaks, he turns them away, explaining that he needs the support of the powers that be. "It was Andreas's gift, maybe his greatest," Franzen writes, "to find singular niches in totalitarian regimes."

This is awfully dark if meant as a representative portrait of the Internet's transparency advocates, many of whom are skeptical about the good faith of corporations, and almost all of whom support the right to digital privacy. But no doubt the issue generates enough confusion to warrant parody. A noble purpose was hard to discern in the recent dissemination by WikiLeaks of the private e-mails of Sony employees. And the notion of a distinction between the half-willing surrender of personal data to corporations and the secret seizure of that data by governments is worth making fun of, especially in the wake of Congress's recent law outsourcing bulk phone-metadata storage from the NSA to phone companies. It's possible, too, that Franzen isn't altogether serious about Andreas's equivalence between socialist informers and transparency advocates. He did title his novel *Purity*, though.

The title seems also to refer to the extreme and somewhat confused feminism of a character named Anabel Laird. Anabel is a font of contradictions. She is an heiress who hates her family money. She aspires to film every square inch of her own skin but can't bear to be seen. In graduate school, she wraps herself in butcher paper and lies down in the dean's office in what appears to be an act of feminist protest, and when she's mocked in a school newspaper, she confronts the editor, Tom Aberant. "I'm here to tell you you're a *jerk*," Anabel says. Tom falls in love.

Tom, though born in Colorado, is temperamentally a Midwesterner, a denomination that in Franzen's world, as a character in *The Corrections* explains, means "*hopeful* or *enthusiastic* or *community-spirited*"—in short, undisillusioned. Anabel's woundedness and oppositionality, which she seems to prize for their own sake, send Tom careening into the State. "This was the

first of the ten thousand times I had the experience of not quite following Anabel's logic," he recalls of his initial encounter with her. The novel's overall plot is so elaborate that it's difficult to say how Anabel and Tom's story relates to Pip and Andreas's without spoiling a number of surprises. In any case, I suspect that most readers will enjoy the two story lines independently—as interwoven novellas rather than as a coherent whole—because the larger framework of the book is a little rickety.

The solid pleasure here is in the close observation of voices. Franzen once joked in print about giving up on the late novels of Henry James, but there's an uncanny convergence between him and the Master. Franzen has not only taken to dividing his novels into long sections, each tethered to a particular character's point of view, as James did. He has also become more willing to sacrifice writerly vanity in his pursuit of that tethering. Where James's sentences grew meandering and abstract, Franzen's have become silly and slack, but in both cases what might look like carelessness is motivated, I think, by discipline. The goal is to eavesdrop more subtly on characters as they talk to themselves.

Tom, after all, can hardly strike a dignified tone while explaining how he came to give up his right to pee from a standing position.

> She proceeded to cry torrentially. The only way I could get her to stop was to become, right then and there, a person who experienced as keenly as she did the unfairness of my being able to pee standing up. I made this adjustment to my personality—and a hundred others like it in our early months together—and henceforth I peed sitting down whenever she could hear me. (When she couldn't, though, I peed in her sink. The part of me that did this was the part that ultimately ruined us and saved me.)

The goal is to eavesdrop on characters as they talk to themselves.

Exasperated, self-mocking, and unrepentantly still a little smug: that, Franzen realizes, is how Tom should sound under the circumstances.

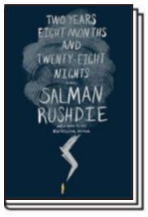
If decent, pliable, put-upon Tom and labile, imperious, counterdependent Anabel were real people, Franzen's portrait of them would no doubt be as unfair as his portrait of the Internet—as unfair as satire has to be. But anyone who's ever been even a little overinvolved with a partner will wince in horrified recognition as Tom and Anabel ruthlessly project their wishes onto each other and then play hot potato with the moral responsibility. ("Is this something you want?" "Not unless you want it and you say so like a human being.")

And even readers who find Anabel hard to take may be able to appreciate her as an agent of the State. If the disingenuously apologetic, self-consciously nice way that Tom first looks at her were a pair of spectacles, then what she does—and what Franzen does through her—is snatch, twist, stretch, drop, and trample on those spectacles. Though Tom wishes only to continue to look *through* them, he is obliged in the end to look *at* his instruments of perception, now wrecked. For Franzen's readers, the experience of having their spectacles similarly distorted and demolished can be a little flummoxing. But thanks to the safe remove that fiction affords—and thanks to the sense of "pleasure and connection" offered by characters whose minds seem alive in the same way as the reader's own—the ride is exhilarating. All the way down. A

Caleb Crain is the author of Necessary Errors.

COVER TO COVER

TWO YEARS EIGHT MONTHS AND TWENTY-EIGHT NIGHTS *SALMAN RUSHDIE* • RANDOM HOUSE



A STORYTELLER hailed as the "Ocean of Notions," teeming with comic inventions, and derided as the "Shah of Blah"—not as in ho-hum, but as in blah, blah, blah: Salman Rushdie has both written about such a figure (in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*) and been him. Lately, Rushdie's critics have had the edge, sighing over his "writerly self-congratulation" and the "portentous mumbo jumbo" of his recent work. Perhaps he's been listening. A bracing dose of self-mockery helps his antic magic and earnest message go down well in his new novel, his 12th.

Once again, Rushdie concocts a fantastic fable about colliding worlds. Sometime in the near future, a storm reopens the slits between the Earth and a jinni-filled realm above. A war with familiar stakes begins. It pits reason against fear-based religious fervor, and wreaks havoc for 1,001 nights.

In his trademark grandiose-meets-goofy narrative mode, Rushdie keeps an exotic cast of characters off-balance. But his most astute, and poignant, move is to pair one catalyst of the turmoil, a chameleon jinni of many names (Princess Aasmaan Peri, Sky-fairy, Dunia, and the Lightning Princess), with a feet-in-the-dirt gardener fed up with fairy stuff. "Chimeras or angels, heaven or hell, metamorphoses or transfigurations, a pox on them all, he had always thought." Rushdie tests him, of course, proving in the process that he hasn't forgotten his own wisdom: without "deep roots in the real," fictional magic can be "mere whimsy."

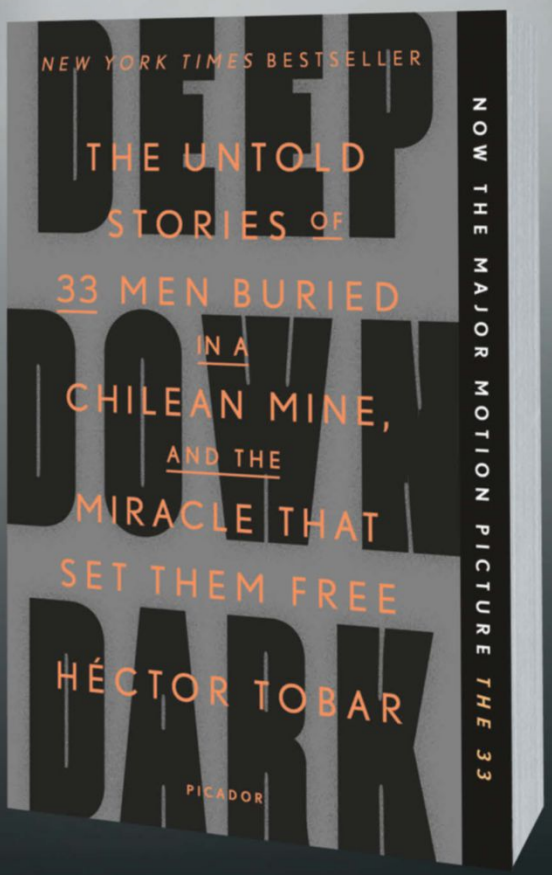
— Ann Hulbert

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/ BOOKS /

The Elitist Allure of Joan Didion

A big biography probes beneath the cool surface.

By MEGHAN DAUM

For most writers, *cool* is a word that rarely tops the list of personality descriptors. *Neurotic* and *introverted* are generally in heavier rotation. For women writers, you can add *solipsistic* and *confessional*.

Maybe that's part of the reason Joan Didion, who's been called all those things but for whom *cool* is surely the most frequently applied adjective, has never been just an inspirational figure. She has been an object of aspirational longing. Revered (worshipped, in many cases) as much for her glamorously aloof public persona as for her infectious, revolutionary-in-its-time prose style, Didion was—and remains—famous in a way that writers seldom are anymore (and, though some of today's embittered literary types like to believe otherwise, seldom were even back then).

It's remarkable, then, that Tracy Daugherty's *The Last Love Song* is the first full-length biography ever published of Didion. Given the number of writers who, especially early in their literary lives, go through a period of Didion-mania intense enough to put most of her vital statistics permanently at their fingertips (the rain-soaked silk curtains in the apartment on 75th Street! the house on Franklin Avenue! the Corvette!), you would think we'd have seen at least as many biographies of her in the past 40 years as have been written about Taylor Swift in the past two (nine, if you must know).

But with coolness comes caginess, not to mention friends and associates who know better than to talk to biographers about living subjects, particularly ones whose recent pasts have been marked by the kind of tragedy that effectively cordons them off from outside inquiry. That Didion, though now 80 years old and frailer than ever, is very much alive and apparently in full command of her intellectual capacities would, at least for many biographers, make her too terrifying to touch.

Fortunately, Daugherty, a fiction writer and an essayist, and the author of biographies of Donald Barthelme and Joseph Heller, knows exactly how much pressure to apply. His excellent and exhaustive book—he draws from a voluminous cache of material, including a conversation I had with Didion in 2003—manages to be provocative without being exactly juicy. Though he digs as deeply as he can, he never plays dirty. He writes:

> In choosing Didion as a subject, I am abjuring abstractions ("the madness of the artist"), avoiding pat explanations of personal antics (booze, gender, trauma, even when they do inform the story), weighing conflicting testimonies, and scouring the public record for the underreported fact, the contradictory details.

Daugherty divides the book into nine sections, beginning, as Didion herself did in 1934, in California's Central Valley. The daughter of Frank and Eduene Didion, who both came from what a local historian calls "Sacramento's landed gentry," Didion grew up in dusty privilege, though Frank was less than a model of stability. He dragged the family through an itinerant period while serving stateside in the military during World War II and, a decade or so later, spent time in the neuropsychiatric ward of a San Francisco hospital for depression.

That last detail may not surprise readers, given the chronic melancholia and hovering paranoia that became Didion's default setting both on and off the page. But Daugherty portrays that emotional fragility as actually something of a matrilineal trait. "If Didion's memory is correct," he writes, "her mother seems to have planted the idea in her daughter's mind that she was too delicate and sensitive for her own good, in the manner of all the family women."

JOHN BRYSON/SYGMA/CORBIS

Eduene, who "'gave teas' the way other mothers breathed," according to Didion, handed her fretful child a notebook as a kind of pacifier. Instead, Daugherty writes, "the notebook tugged her toward an inner life, a private world brewing storms beyond her mother's control." Still, for all her investment in her daughter's brittleness, it was Eduene who talked to Didion like a grown-up, indulging her fantasies of urban sophistication—"I kept playing around with writing and imagining being a writer, which usually involved having a quote-unquote Manhattan penthouse," Didion has said. In 1955, while a 20-year-old student at Berkeley, Didion applied to *Mademoiselle*'s guest-editor program, a plum assignment that involved a month-long stay in New York, and was accepted.

Though Didion didn't become a bona fide star until after she decamped to Los Angeles in the mid-1960s, her legend may as well have begun the moment she stepped off the plane at Idlewild in the spring of 1955 for the *Mademoiselle* post. The exhilarations and despondencies of that summer—and those of the years in New York that followed—are what she went on to capture with famously visceral precision in "Goodbye to All That." The tone and spirit of that seminal 1967 essay have been internalized, and in many cases downright copied, by countless young writers who came along in her wake.

In charting this period, Daugherty relies heavily on interviews with Noel Parmentel, a journalist and filmmaker who was a gadflyish fixture on the 1950s New York literary scene. He functioned for Didion as a combination of mentor and suitor (though years later, their friendship ended when Parmentel recognized himself in the abusive, alcoholic character Warren Bogart in *A Book of Common Prayer*). The young Didion, new to the city and writing fashion copy by day while working on a novel at night—"I never saw ambition like that," Parmentel once said—cut a pathologically shy profile. But Parmentel, who called her "that mouse," considered her eminently worth knowing. He procured professional and personal introductions, including, one night in 1958, to John Gregory Dunne, about whom he told her, "*This* is the guy you ought to marry."

If Didion and Dunne were in some ways opposites in temperament (he could be irascible and prone to grudges), they shared a class sensibility that Didion found comforting. She noted similarities between Dunne's hometown of West Hartford, Connecticut, and her own. "The minute I got into this house of great calm and order and peace and well-being," she has said of her first visit to his childhood home, "I thought, I want to marry him ... There were meals. There was a closet full of organdy tablecloths on long rollers—the way they came back from the French laundry, under tissue."

Didion occupies the rare cultural position of having been a sacred cow (or sacred mouse) from almost the beginning.



THE LAST LOVE SONG: A BIOGRAPHY OF JOAN DIDION
TRACY DAUGHERTY
St. Martin's

THE SWEEPING SCOPE of *The Last Love Song* offers room for two mini-biographies within the main biography, one of Dunne, whom Didion married in 1964, and the other of the couple's adopted daughter, Quintana Roo. On Dunne, Daugherty is respectful but also forthright about the demons and deficits that at times posed threats to marriage and career alike. Though Didion's line about traveling to Honolulu "in lieu of filing for divorce" (which shocked readers of *Life* magazine in 1969) became one of her best-remembered, Dunne was no less candid about the couple's troubles.

"Dunne often told friends at parties during this period—sometimes joking, sometimes not—that his marriage was a week-to-week affair," Daugherty writes. In his "fictionalized memoir," *Vegas*, Dunne offers a scene in which his character calls his wife from his temporary apartment and tells her he has a date that night with a 19-year-old who's "supposed to suck me and fuck me." "It's research," the wife responds casually.

As Daugherty sees it, the marriage suffered not just from "the stresses of writing, money, lots of drinking," but also from the disillusionment born of realizing that an egalitarian partnership is perhaps more oxymoron than attainable goal.

> Though neither could imagine *not* being married to a writer, though they counted on each other for editorial and professional support, an edginess grew between them—not *competition* so much as *sadness* that things could not always be equal.

The marriage eventually found, if not true equality, at least its equilibrium, largely thanks, Daugherty suggests, to Dunne's having greater standing in Hollywood when the couple's screenwriting collaboration took off in the early 1970s.

Subsequent decades saw Didion's fiction and nonfiction veer toward the political. She covered the American military presence in El Salvador, wrote about Cuban exiles in Miami, and published the Vietnam War–era novel *Democracy*. Her 17,000-word essay, published in *The New York Review of Books* in 1991, about the five teenagers falsely convicted in the Central Park–jogger trial represented one of the first divergences from the generally accepted theories about the case.

By then, the couple was back living in New York, where, in 2003, Dunne collapsed from a fatal heart attack in the couple's Upper East Side apartment. Less than two years later, Quintana died of acute pancreatitis at age 39 after a series of hospitalizations and just before the publication of *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Didion's chronicle of the aftermath of Dunne's death and her best-selling book to date. In *Blue Nights*, published six years later, Didion sets out to write Quintana's

elegy, but understandably and perhaps inevitably, can scarcely bring herself to the task.

Fortunately, Daugherty picks up the slack, showing impressive restraint while also doing his due diligence and asking many questions that, in *Blue Nights* and elsewhere, Didion leaves largely untouched. Was Quintana's prodigious drinking (a trait she shared with her parents but may have been physically less well constituted to handle) a cause of her illness? Who exactly was Gerry Michael, the widower in his 50s whom she married in 2003, five months before she fell ill? To what degree might Quintana's psychiatric struggles—which in *Blue Nights* Didion confines to phrases like *suicidal despair* and a flummoxing array of diagnoses (manic depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, borderline personality disorder)—have been connected to a childhood spent at Hollywood parties and in far-flung hotel rooms? To what degree might they have been inherited from the chaotic biological family with whom she reluctantly reconnected in 1998?

Daugherty gets only so far. "Acute pancreatitis," he allows, is "an inflammation and infection of the pancreas usually caused in young people by prolonged drug or alcohol abuse." Quintana met Michael, a former rock drummer, at the Mayfair, a Manhattan bar that she frequented and he tended. Daugherty cites a childhood friend of Quintana's who "believed Quintana's depressions and drinking were 'probably intertwined' with her final illnesses." As for Quintana's birth family, whom Didion excoriates in *Blue Nights*, Daugherty writes that he "felt obligated" to try to locate them "to see if their story illuminated anything about Didion." That he could find "no legal path around" sealed adoption records in California Family Law was "bad news for my book," he writes, "but soothing to me as a citizen."

Daugherty means as an American citizen, but he may be talking as well about literary citizenship, given that remaining in good standing on that terrain seems to require the delicate treatment of certain legendary figures. In the case of Didion, there has always been something uncouth about asking too much, pressing too hard. You can imagine even the most intrepid and meticulous biographer—and Daugherty certainly qualifies—running into roadblocks on the Didion path and letting out a relieved "Oh, well!" That's because Didion not only has been granted special status by virtue of her age and the tragedies she's endured. She also occupies the rare cultural position of having been a sacred cow (or sacred mouse) from almost the beginning. The gushing love she gets from readers and fellow writers has often been characterized as obsessive, but it's always been, at its root, protective. To be a Didion fan is to be a defender of the sharp and brutal edges, a champion of the dispassion, a forgiver—even an appreciator—of the simmering elitism.

For all her brilliance, Didion might now be deemed too haughty to tolerate, the ultimate white girl.

In an era when discussions of privilege and gender have become preoccupations in certain corners of the media and, in some circles, feelings have been granted equal status with facts, it's interesting to think about how Didion would have fared had she come to New York in 2015 rather than 1955. She is, after all, a writer for whom feelings (especially her own) are inherently unreliable sources. She assailed feminism's "invention of women as a 'class'" and wrote dismissively of the oppressed "Everywoman" who "needed contraceptives because she was raped on every date ... and raped finally on the abortionist's table." She never got involved in the women's movement, because, according to a friend, "she was beyond that." Didion is, for all her sensitivity and curiosity, more than a little bit of a class snob. "Dunne joked about her archconservative values," Daugherty writes. For much of her life, it seems, she voted Republican.

As new generations of artists and tastemakers grow hungrier for voices from worlds where mothers do not give teas and closets are not full of organdy tablecloths on long rollers, it's easy to imagine a writer of Didion's tastes and sensibility being called out in the blogosphere and in social media as fundamentally gifted yet fundamentally "problematic" (to use a term of the moment that Didion might have great fun with) in her politics and tone. For all her brilliance, she might be deemed too haughty to tolerate, the ultimate white girl.

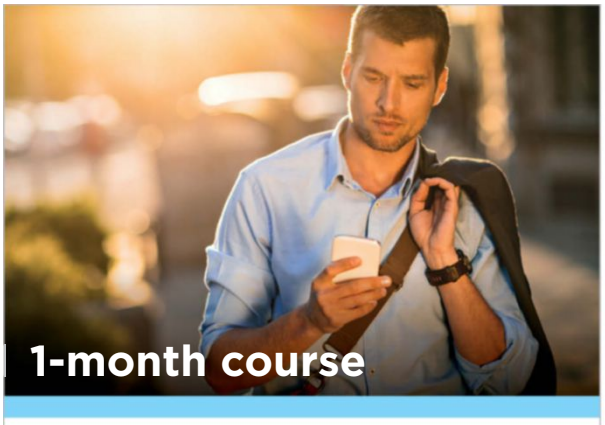
But that would be both reductive and a total missing of the point. Didion may be a white girl to whom generations of white girls have been disproportionately drawn, but she's one we—and all kinds of readers—have desperately needed. In the prefeminist 1950s and '60s, we needed her to show that it was possible for a woman to put her writing first without apology or fanfare. In the let-it-all-hang-out '70s, we needed her to be the disciplined storyteller who could deliver the goods while keeping herself at arm's length. In the '80s and '90s, we needed her to separate the nation's ghosts from the political machine. More recently, we needed her to grow old before us and, even amid unthinkable personal tragedy, show that it's possible not only to remain visible and vital but also to remain unimpeachably, ineluctably cool. We still need her. Maybe now more than ever. A

Meghan Daum is the author, most recently, of The Unspeakable: And Other Subjects of Discussion.

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/ BOOKS /

The Fearless Erica Jong

In her 70s, she's as eager as ever for sex and adventure.

By SANDRA TSING LOH

> The truth is: I do not want to finish the book and let it go. It is like letting my life go. It will cease to be mine; it will go out into the world and become like a fire hydrant for any cur to piss on. It will begin its long journey from my will, my brain, my language, into the hearts of those who need it. But, in the interim, like a child, it may have to take a lot of abuse. Sometimes my books are messengers that people want to shoot. And then they linger on, despite the odds.
>
> — Erica Jong, *Fear of Fifty*

I'VE TAKEN ERICA JONG to bed. That is, I made her Fear trilogy—*Fear of Flying* (1973), *Fear of Fifty* (1994), and now *Fear of Dying*—my bedtime reading for a week, playing catch-up with a cultural phenomenon that doesn't just "linger on," as she humbly puts it. From the start, Jong has surged to the front, leading Baby Boomers where they fear to tread, though somehow I've missed out until now. I was 11 years old when *Fear of Flying* was published and didn't notice when it took off, a sensational debut novel by a 31-year-old that has sold more than 27 million copies (and remains in print). Whatever was happening in the cloud-streaked skies above my middle-class home—louche Jacqueline Susann and Jackie Collins girls in miniskirts flying first-class in a confetti swirl of champagne and pills and zipless fucks—down below I was eating meatloaf, wearing plaid jumpers made from Simplicity patterns, and watching PBS. But now that I've joined her on the far side of 50, those two decades between us barely register. At any rate, we're both facing the countdown, aren't we?

Still, I wasn't ready to rush into Jong's latest. I wanted to work my way up. So I turned first to the semiautobiographical novel that made her name, and even at my advanced age, I was shocked. It's totally not the sort of book I thought it was. Visiting a psychiatrists' convention in Vienna with her shrink husband, Jong's 29-year-old heroine, Isadora Wing, lusts after all kinds of men—naturally. But there isn't a lot of actual sex. The zipless fuck (*was that doing it in an airplane lavatory?*, I'd always wondered) refers to the fantasy—not the reality—of quick sex among strangers, unencumbered by baggage or backstory or even zippers. The extramarital lover Isadora does end up taking is most notable for his dirty toenails and his impotence. The book is witty, candid, and brainy—there are meditations on everything from Western psychoanalysis to being Jewish in modern-day Germany—and what an eye its author has. (Jong started out writing poetry.) "Germany is patrolled by armies of gray-coated ladies in Tyrolean hats and sensible shoes and jowls crimson with exploded capillaries." Closer to home, she zooms in on the "remarkable specimen" an unclothed early boyfriend reveals, noting "a most memorable abstract design of blue veins on its Kandinsky-purple underside."

Isadora Wing's head is where the real action is, and books, not just bodies, get her going. As a girl, Isadora says, she read and read: "Pearl Buck, Tolstoy, or Carolyn Keene, the author of *Nancy Drew*. I made none of the snotty divisions

ILLUSTRATION BY ELLEN WEINSTEIN

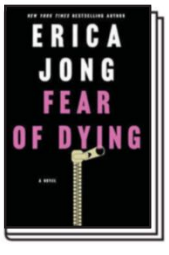
you learn to make later." Lonely in an unhappy marriage, Isadora then tried to write poetry, but where were the female literary role models?

> We looked to our uncertain heroines for help, and lo and behold—Simone de Beauvoir never makes a move without wondering *what would Sartre think*? And Lillian Hellman wants to be as much of a man as Dashiell Hammett so he'll love her like he loves himself. And Doris Lessing's Anna Wulf can't come unless she's in love, which is seldom. And the rest—the women writers, the women painters—most of them were shy, shrinking, schizoid. Timid in their lives and brave only in their art. Emily Dickinson, the Brontës, Virginia Woolf, Carson McCullers ... Flannery O'Connor raising peacocks and living with her mother. Sylvia Plath sticking her head into an oven of myth. Georgia O'Keeffe alone in the desert, apparently a survivor. What a group! Severe, suicidal, strange. Where was the female Chaucer? One lusty lady who had juice and joy and love and talent too?

Fear of Flying was less *The Happy Hooker* (also from the 1970s) than *A Portrait of the Artist as a Horny*—and why not?—*Young Woman*. (John Updike compared *Fear of Flying* to *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Portnoy's Complaint*.) That Jong's novel was never mentioned while I was studying literature in graduate school baffles me. This was in the 1980s, and I attended for a leisurely six years—there was certainly, as Andrew Marvell would say, world enough and time. The female literary canon began and ended with Woolf, and after covering the usual all-male parade from Chaucer to Joyce, my mostly male professors went on to later-20th-century authors such as John Cheever, Raymond Carver, and John Barth (*Giles Goat-Boy*—why?). If I spent most of a year on a paper that explored metafiction in Robert Coover's *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop*. by way of an analysis of baseball statistics (true story!), surely Jong deserved a place on the list.

Not that she is the sort to let academic myopia daunt her. Well before my time, Jong charted her own path through the staid syllabus, as I learned from *Fear of Fifty*, a midlife memoir that I found interesting, if more collage than sustained narrative. At Barnard, where she was an undergraduate from 1959 to 1963, virtually no female writers were taught. Going on to study poetry at Columbia, she wrote her master's thesis on representations of women in Alexander Pope's work. She then discovered the poetry of Plath and Anne Sexton, and eventually struck up a friendship with Sexton, who seems to have found Jong's spirit at least temporarily contagious: they drank vodka gimlets at the Algonquin, and Sexton exuberantly inscribed one of her books for Jong, "Yes, yes, let's live!"

For aging Baby Boomers, Jong has a refreshingly sensible message: don't go quietly, but do ease up.



FEAR OF DYING
ERICA JONG
St. Martin's

I THOUGHT I MIGHT be able to report that *Fear of Dying* is a *Death of Ivana Ilyich* for our era, but Jong's novelette is better compared to one of Woody Allen's later, jauntier movies—which suits her intentions. For the Baby Boomers now gearing up to rage, rage against the dying of the light, Jong has a refreshingly sensible message: don't go quietly, but do ease up a little. The narrator, an aging actress named Vanessa Wonderman, has it all—dying parents, a rich 80-something husband with erectile dysfunction, a daughter expecting her first child, and a sick dog. Isadora Wing, a friend of Vanessa's, makes brief, pleasant appearances. So does Jong's trademark term from her classic. Upset about all this aging and death, Vanessa seeks to reconnect with her youthful sexuality via a hookup site, Zipless.com.

But this time Jong goes for brisk satire, even shtick, and you won't find Vanessa doing riffs on Kübler-Ross, Dr. Kevorkian, or the paucity of aging heroines. Jong focuses on having wry fun as the Web site delivers up a succession of weirdos. A 40-something suitor, irked by Vanessa's refusal of *Fifty Shades of Grey*–style S&M, skewers her with "You're fifty if you're a day." To which she snaps back, "Thanks, I'll tell my plastic surgeon. I'm sure he'll be pleased." (She is 60.) The big plot turn is predictable: Vanessa's husband, Asher, ends up in the hospital with an aortic aneurysm. (When he's asked, "Do you want a metal or a porcine valve?," Asher responds, "I don't care. I'm not kosher.") This near-death experience brings Vanessa and her husband closer, and they travel to India, where they forget about penis pumps and are thrilled to discover "slow sex in a fast world."

Jong's newest novel is unabashedly chick lit of a certain age. At times frothy, at times poignant, *Fear of Dying* left me with a sense of relaxed cheer. Reading it is akin to enjoying a mimosa-filled brunch and then settling in to watch *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* with an old—but stylishly well-preserved—pal. And what's wrong with that? Remember, Jong is the irrepressible reader-turned-writer who got her start making none of the "snotty divisions you learn to make later" among literary genres. She knows this book may take some abuse, especially since the messenger comes bearing news that will send some for their guns: women over 60 want sex. Even in her 70s, Jong remains the brash, randy adventurer whose work curs of the world may piss on, but who isn't about to let that stop her. She has what she was looking for many decades ago, the Chaucerian lust and joy of April's eternal shoures soote. A

Sandra Tsing Loh is the author, most recently, of The Madwoman in the Volvo: My Year of Raging Hormones.

The Coddling of the American Mind

In the name of emotional well-being, college students are increasingly demanding protection from words and ideas they don't like, and seeking punishment of those who give even accidental offense. Here's why that's disastrous for education—and likely to worsen mental health on campus.

By Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt

Photographs by Andrew B. Myers


COLLEGE



SOMETHING STRANGE is happening at America's colleges and universities. A movement is arising, undirected and driven largely by students, to scrub campuses clean of words, ideas, and subjects that might cause discomfort or give offense. Last December, Jeannie Suk wrote in an online article for *The New Yorker* about law students asking her fellow professors at Harvard not to teach rape law—or, in one case, even use the word *violate* (as in "that violates the law") lest it cause students distress. In February, Laura Kipnis, a professor at Northwestern University, wrote an essay in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* describing a new campus politics of sexual paranoia—and was then subjected to a long investigation after students who were offended by the article and by a tweet she'd sent filed Title IX complaints against her. In June, a professor protecting himself with a pseudonym wrote an essay for Vox describing how gingerly he now has to teach. "I'm a Liberal Professor, and My Liberal Students Terrify Me," the headline said. A number of popular comedians, including Chris Rock, have stopped performing on college campuses (see Caitlin Flanagan's article on page 54). Jerry Seinfeld and Bill Maher have publicly condemned the oversensitivity of college students, saying too many of them can't take a joke.

Two terms have risen quickly from obscurity into common campus parlance. *Microaggressions* are small actions or word choices that seem on their face to have no malicious intent but that are thought of as a kind of violence nonetheless. For example, by some campus guidelines, it is a microaggression to ask an Asian American or Latino American "Where were you born?," because this implies that he or she is not a real American. *Trigger warnings* are alerts that professors are expected to issue if something in a course might cause a strong emotional response. For example, some students have called for warnings that Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* describes racial violence and that F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* portrays misogyny and physical abuse, so that students who have been previously victimized by racism or domestic violence can choose to avoid these works, which they believe might "trigger" a recurrence of past trauma.

Some recent campus actions border on the surreal. In April, at Brandeis University, the Asian American student association sought to raise awareness of microaggressions against Asians through an installation on the steps of an academic hall. The installation gave examples of microaggressions such as "Aren't you supposed to be good at math?" and "I'm colorblind! I don't see race." But a backlash arose among other Asian American students, who felt that the display itself was a microaggression. The association removed the installation, and its president wrote an e-mail to the entire student body apologizing to anyone who was "triggered or hurt by the content of the microaggressions."

This new climate is slowly being institutionalized, and is affecting what can be said in the classroom, even as a basis for discussion. During the 2014–15 school year, for instance, the deans and department chairs at the 10 University of California system schools were presented by administrators at faculty leader-training sessions with examples of microaggressions. The list of offensive statements included: "America is the land of opportunity" and "I believe the most qualified person should get the job."

The press has typically described these developments as a resurgence of political correctness. That's partly right, although there are important differences between what's happening now and what happened in the 1980s and '90s. That movement sought to restrict speech (specifically hate speech aimed at marginalized groups), but it also challenged the literary, philosophical, and historical canon, seeking to widen it by including more-diverse perspectives. The current movement is largely about emotional well-being. More than the last, it presumes an extraordinary fragility of the collegiate psyche, and therefore elevates the goal of protecting students from psychological harm. The ultimate aim, it seems, is to turn campuses into "safe spaces" where young adults are shielded from words and ideas that make some uncomfortable. And more than the last, this movement seeks to punish anyone who interferes with that aim, even accidentally. You might call this impulse *vindictive protectiveness*. It is creating a culture in which everyone must think twice before speaking up, lest they face charges of insensitivity, aggression, or worse.

We have been studying this development for a while now, with rising alarm. (Greg Lukianoff is a constitutional lawyer and the president and CEO of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, which defends free speech and academic freedom on campus, and has advocated for students and faculty involved in many of the incidents this article describes; Jonathan Haidt is a social psychologist who studies the American culture wars. The stories of how we each came to this subject can be read in the sidebars on pages 47 and 49.) The dangers that these trends pose to scholarship and to the quality of American universities are significant; we could write a whole essay detailing them. But in this essay we focus on a different question: What are the effects of this new protectiveness *on the students themselves*? Does it benefit the people it is supposed to help? What exactly are students learning when they spend four years or more in a community that polices unintentional slights, places warning labels on works of classic literature, and in many other ways conveys the sense that words can be forms of violence that require strict control by campus authorities, who are expected to act as both protectors and prosecutors?

There's a saying common in education circles: Don't teach students *what* to think; teach them *how* to think. The idea goes back at least as far as Socrates. Today, what we call the Socratic method is a way of teaching that fosters critical thinking, in part by encouraging students to question their own unexamined beliefs, as well as the received wisdom of those around them. Such questioning sometimes leads to discomfort, and even to anger, on the way to understanding.

But vindictive protectiveness teaches students to think in a very different way. It prepares them poorly for professional life, which often demands intellectual engagement with people and ideas one might find uncongenial or wrong. The harm may be more immediate, too. A campus culture devoted to policing speech and punishing speakers is likely to engender patterns of thought that are surprisingly similar to those long identified by cognitive behavioral therapists as causes of depression and anxiety. The new protectiveness may be teaching students to think pathologically.

How Did We Get Here?

It's difficult to know exactly why vindictive protectiveness has burst forth so powerfully in the past few years. The phenomenon may be related to recent changes in the interpretation of federal antidiscrimination statutes (about which more later). But the answer probably involves generational shifts as well. Childhood itself has changed greatly during the past generation. Many Baby Boomers and Gen Xers can remember riding their bicycles around their hometowns, unchaperoned by adults, by the time they were 8 or 9 years old. In the hours after school, kids were expected to occupy themselves, getting into minor scrapes and learning from their experiences. But "free range" childhood became less common in the 1980s. The surge in crime from the '60s through the early '90s made Baby Boomer parents more protective than their own parents had been. Stories of abducted children appeared more frequently in the news, and in 1984, images of them began showing up on milk cartons. In response, many parents pulled in the reins and worked harder to keep their children safe.

The flight to safety also happened at school. Dangerous play structures were removed from playgrounds; peanut butter was banned from student lunches. After the 1999 Columbine massacre in Colorado, many schools cracked down on bullying, implementing "zero tolerance" policies. In a variety of ways, children born after 1980—the Millennials—got a consistent message from adults: life is dangerous, but adults will do everything in their power to protect you from harm, not just from strangers but from one another as well.

These same children grew up in a culture that was (and still is) becoming more politically polarized. Republicans and Democrats have never particularly liked each other, but survey data going back to the 1970s show that on average, their mutual dislike used to be surprisingly mild. Negative feelings have grown steadily stronger, however, particularly since the early 2000s. Political scientists call this process "affective partisan polarization," and it is a very serious problem for any democracy. As each side increasingly demonizes the other, compromise becomes more difficult. A recent study shows that implicit or unconscious biases are now at least as strong across political parties as they are across races.

So it's not hard to imagine why students arriving on campus today might be more desirous of protection and more hostile toward ideological opponents than in generations past. This hostility, and the self-righteousness fueled by strong partisan emotions, can be expected to add force to any moral crusade. A principle of moral psychology is that "morality binds and blinds." Part of what we do when we make moral judgments is express allegiance to a team. But that can interfere with our ability to think critically. Acknowledging that the other side's viewpoint has any merit is risky—your teammates may see you as a traitor.

Social media makes it extraordinarily easy to join crusades, express solidarity and outrage, and shun traitors. Facebook was founded in 2004, and since 2006 it has allowed children as young as 13 to join. This means that the first wave of students who spent all their teen years using Facebook reached college in 2011, and graduated from college only this year.

These first true "social-media natives" may be different from members of previous generations in how they go about sharing their moral judgments and supporting one another in moral campaigns and conflicts. We find much to like about these trends; young people today are engaged with one another, with news stories, and with prosocial endeavors to a greater degree than when the dominant technology was television. But social media has also fundamentally shifted the balance of power in relationships between students and faculty; the latter increasingly fear what students might do to their reputations and careers by stirring up online mobs against them.

We do not mean to imply simple causation, but rates of mental illness in young adults have been rising, both on campus and off, in recent decades. Some portion of the increase is surely due to better diagnosis and greater willingness to

seek help, but most experts seem to agree that some portion of the trend is real. Nearly all of the campus mental-health directors surveyed in 2013 by the American College Counseling Association reported that the number of students with severe psychological problems was rising at their schools. The rate of emotional distress reported by students themselves is also high, and rising. In a 2014 survey by the American College Health Association, 54 percent of college students surveyed said that they had "felt overwhelming anxiety" in the past 12 months, up from 49 percent in the same survey just five years earlier. Students seem to be reporting more emotional crises; many seem fragile, and this has surely changed the way university faculty and administrators interact with them. The question is whether some of those changes might be doing more harm than good.

The Thinking Cure

For millennia, philosophers have understood that we don't see life as it is; we see a version distorted by our hopes, fears, and other attachments. The Buddha said, "Our life is the creation of our mind." Marcus Aurelius said, "Life itself is but what you deem it." The quest for wisdom in many traditions begins with this insight. Early Buddhists and the Stoics, for example, developed practices for reducing attachments, thinking more clearly, and finding release from the emotional torments of normal mental life.

Cognitive behavioral therapy is a modern embodiment of this ancient wisdom. It is the most extensively studied nonpharmaceutical treatment of mental illness, and is used widely to treat depression, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, and addiction. It can even be of help to schizophrenics. No other form of psychotherapy has been shown to work for a broader range of problems. Studies have generally found that it is as effective as antidepressant drugs (such as Prozac) in the treatment of anxiety and depression. The therapy is relatively quick and easy to learn; after a few months of training, many patients can do it on their own. Unlike drugs, cognitive behavioral therapy keeps working long after treatment is stopped, because it teaches thinking skills that people can continue to use.

The goal is to minimize distorted thinking and see the world more accurately. You start by learning the names of the dozen or so most common cognitive distortions (such as overgeneralizing, discounting positives, and emotional reasoning; see the list in the sidebar on page 51). Each time you notice yourself falling prey to one of them, you name it, describe the facts of the situation, consider alternative interpretations, and then choose an interpretation of events more in line with those facts. Your emotions follow your new interpretation. In time, this process becomes automatic. When people improve their mental hygiene in this way—when they free themselves from the repetitive irrational thoughts that had previously filled so much of their consciousness—they become less depressed, anxious, and angry.

The parallel to formal education is clear: cognitive behavioral therapy teaches good critical-thinking skills, the sort that educators have striven for so long to impart. By almost any definition, critical thinking requires grounding one's beliefs in evidence rather than in emotion or desire, and learning how to search for and evaluate evidence that might contradict one's initial hypothesis. But does campus life today foster critical thinking? Or does it coax students to think in more-distorted ways?

Let's look at recent trends in higher education in light of the distortions that cognitive behavioral therapy identifies. We will draw the names and descriptions of these distortions from David D. Burns's popular book *Feeling Good*, as well as from the second edition of *Treatment Plans and Interventions for Depression and Anxiety Disorders*, by Robert L. Leahy, Stephen J. F. Holland, and Lata K. McGinn.

Higher Education's Embrace of "Emotional Reasoning"

Burns defines *emotional reasoning* as assuming "that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are: 'I feel it, therefore it must be true.'" Leahy, Holland, and McGinn define it as letting "your feelings guide your interpretation of reality." But, of course, subjective feelings are not always trustworthy guides; unrestrained, they can cause people to lash out at others who have done nothing wrong. Therapy often involves talking yourself down from the idea that each of your emotional responses represents something true or important.

According to the most-basic tenets of psychology, helping people with anxiety disorders avoid the things they fear is misguided.

Emotional reasoning dominates many campus debates and discussions. A claim that someone's words are "offensive" is not just an expression of one's own subjective feeling of offendedness. It is, rather, a public charge that the speaker has done something objectively wrong. It is a demand that the speaker apologize or be punished by some authority for committing an offense.

There have always been some people who believe they have a right not to be offended. Yet throughout American history—from the Victorian era to the free-speech activism of the 1960s and '70s—radicals have pushed boundaries and mocked prevailing sensibilities. Sometime in the 1980s, however, college campuses began to focus on preventing offensive speech, especially speech that might be hurtful to women or minority groups. The sentiment underpinning this goal was laudable, but it quickly produced some absurd results.

Among the most famous early examples was the so-called water-buffalo incident at the University of Pennsylvania. In 1993, the university charged an Israeli-born student with racial

harassment after he yelled "Shut up, you water buffalo!" to a crowd of black sorority women that was making noise at night outside his dorm-room window. Many scholars and pundits at the time could not see how the term *water buffalo* (a rough translation of a Hebrew insult for a thoughtless or rowdy person) was a racial slur against African Americans, and as a result, the case became international news.

Claims of a right not to be offended have continued to arise since then, and universities have continued to privilege them. In a particularly egregious 2008 case, for instance, Indiana University–Purdue University at Indianapolis found a white student guilty of racial harassment for reading a book titled *Notre Dame vs. the Klan*. The book honored student opposition to the Ku Klux Klan when it marched on Notre Dame in 1924. Nonetheless, the picture of a Klan rally on the book's cover offended at least one of the student's coworkers (he was a janitor as well as a student), and that was enough for a guilty finding by the university's Affirmative Action Office.

These examples may seem extreme, but the reasoning behind them has become more commonplace on campus in recent years. Last year, at the University of St. Thomas, in Minnesota, an event called Hump Day, which would have allowed people to pet a camel, was abruptly canceled. Students had created a Facebook group where they protested the event for animal cruelty, for being a waste of money, and for being insensitive to people from the Middle East. The inspiration for the camel had almost certainly come from a popular TV commercial in which a camel saunters around an office on a Wednesday, celebrating "hump day"; it was devoid of any reference to Middle Eastern peoples. Nevertheless, the group organizing the event announced on its Facebook page that the event would be canceled because the "program [was] dividing people and would make for an uncomfortable and possibly unsafe environment."

Because there is a broad ban in academic circles on "blaming the victim," it is generally considered unacceptable to question the reasonableness (let alone the sincerity) of someone's emotional state, particularly if those emotions are linked to one's group identity. The thin argument "I'm offended" becomes an unbeatable trump card. This leads to what Jonathan Rauch, a contributing editor at this magazine, calls the "offendedness sweepstakes," in which opposing parties use claims of offense as cudgels. In the process, the bar for what we consider unacceptable speech is lowered further and further.

Since 2013, new pressure from the federal government has reinforced this trend. Federal antidiscrimination statutes regulate on-campus harassment and unequal treatment based on sex, race, religion, and national origin. Until recently, the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights acknowledged that speech must be "objectively offensive" before it could be deemed actionable as sexual harassment—it would have to pass the "reasonable person" test. To be prohibited, the office wrote in 2003, allegedly harassing speech would have to go "beyond the mere expression of views, words, symbols or thoughts that some person finds offensive."

But in 2013, the Departments of Justice and Education greatly broadened the definition of sexual harassment to include verbal conduct that is simply "unwelcome." Out of fear of federal investigations, universities are now applying that standard—defining unwelcome speech as harassment—not just to sex, but to race, religion, and veteran status as well. Everyone is supposed to rely upon his or her own subjective feelings to decide whether a comment by a professor

Greg Lukianoff's Story

IN THE WINTER of 2007–08, I slipped into a deep depression. I had struggled with bouts of depression my entire life, many of them quite severe, but this was in a category by itself. I could not shake the feeling that any mistake I made in my professional life—anything short of complete success—would mean ruin; nightmare scenarios played continually in my head.

In January 2008, after I moved from Philadelphia to New York City to be surrounded by family and friends, I started seeing a therapist who practiced cognitive behavioral therapy, and began to turn a corner. I eventually learned to question irrationally negative thoughts about myself, the people I encountered, the future. Since then, my battles with depression have become winnable skirmishes.

As I was learning to identify distortions in my own thinking, I began to recognize them in the thinking of others. The organization I lead, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, supports free-speech rights on campus. One case that was much on my mind had taken place in the fall of 2007. At the University of Delaware, as part of a diversity-focused orientation program, students reported being made to "take a stance" on one side of a room or another,



displaying their personal views on polarizing topics such as affirmative action and gay marriage—even if they didn't yet know where they stood. Such an activity is not only reductive and unscholarly, it is a classic demonstration of the all-or-nothing thinking I had struggled with.

The resident assistants who implemented the program had been given training materials that sought to define racism, and included statements such as "the term [*racist*] applies to all white people" living in the United States" and "people of color cannot be racists." While such claims may be good topics for debate, they seem on their face to be examples of several classic cognitive distortions—overgeneralizing, dichotomous thinking, and an inability to disconfirm. Campus leaders seemed to be telling students that they *should* overgeneralize, personalize, and magnify problems.

I began to wonder whether campus culture, more generally, was coaxing students toward distorted thinking. And I began to wonder whether distorted thinking patterns were not only interfering with truth-seeking, but also perhaps leading to a worsening of student mental health. I took this question to my friend, the social psychologist Jonathan Haidt.

Illustration by Hieronymous

or a fellow student is unwelcome, and therefore grounds for a harassment claim. Emotional reasoning is now accepted as evidence.

If our universities are teaching students that their emotions can be used effectively as weapons—or at least as evidence in administrative proceedings—then they are teaching students to nurture a kind of hypersensitivity that will lead them into countless drawn-out conflicts in college and beyond. Schools may be training students in thinking styles that will damage their careers and friendships, along with their mental health.

Fortune-Telling and Trigger Warnings

Burns defines *fortune-telling* as "anticipat[ing] that things will turn out badly" and feeling "convinced that your prediction is an already-established fact." Leahy, Holland, and McGinn define it as "predict[ing] the future negatively" or seeing potential danger in an everyday situation. The recent spread of demands for trigger warnings on reading assignments with provocative content is an example of fortune-telling.

The idea that words (or smells or any sensory input) can trigger searing memories of past trauma—and intense fear that it may be repeated—has been around at least since World War I, when psychiatrists began treating soldiers for what is now called post-traumatic stress disorder. But explicit trigger warnings are believed to have originated much more recently, on message boards in the early days of the Internet. Trigger warnings became particularly prevalent in self-help and feminist forums, where they allowed readers who had suffered from traumatic events like sexual assault to avoid graphic content that might trigger flashbacks or panic attacks. Search-engine trends indicate that the phrase broke into mainstream use online around 2011, spiked in 2014, and reached an all-time high in 2015. The use of trigger warnings on campus appears to have followed a similar trajectory; seemingly overnight, students at universities across the country have begun demanding that their professors issue warnings before covering material that might evoke a negative emotional response.

In 2013, a task force composed of administrators, students, recent alumni, and one faculty member at Oberlin College, in Ohio, released an online resource guide for faculty (subsequently retracted in the face of faculty pushback) that included a list of topics warranting trigger warnings. These topics included classism and privilege, among many others. The task force recommended that materials that might trigger negative reactions among students be avoided altogether unless they "contribute directly" to course goals, and suggested that works that were "too important to avoid" be made optional.

It's hard to imagine how novels illustrating classism and privilege could provoke or reactivate the kind of terror that is typically implicated in PTSD. Rather, trigger warnings are sometimes demanded for a long list of ideas and attitudes that some students find politically offensive, in the name of preventing other students from being harmed. This is an example of what psychologists call "motivated reasoning"—we spontaneously generate arguments for conclusions we want to support. Once *you* find something hateful, it is easy to argue that exposure to the hateful thing could traumatize some *other* people. You believe that you know how others will react, and that their reaction could be devastating. Preventing that devastation becomes a moral obligation for the whole community. Books for which students have called publicly for trigger warnings within the past couple of years include Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (at Rutgers, for "suicidal inclinations") and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (at Columbia, for sexual assault).

Jeannie Suk's *New Yorker* essay described the difficulties of teaching rape law in the age of trigger warnings. Some students, she wrote, have pressured their professors to avoid teaching the subject in order to protect themselves and their classmates from potential distress. Suk compares this to trying to teach "a medical student who is training to be a surgeon but who fears that he'll become distressed if he sees or handles blood."

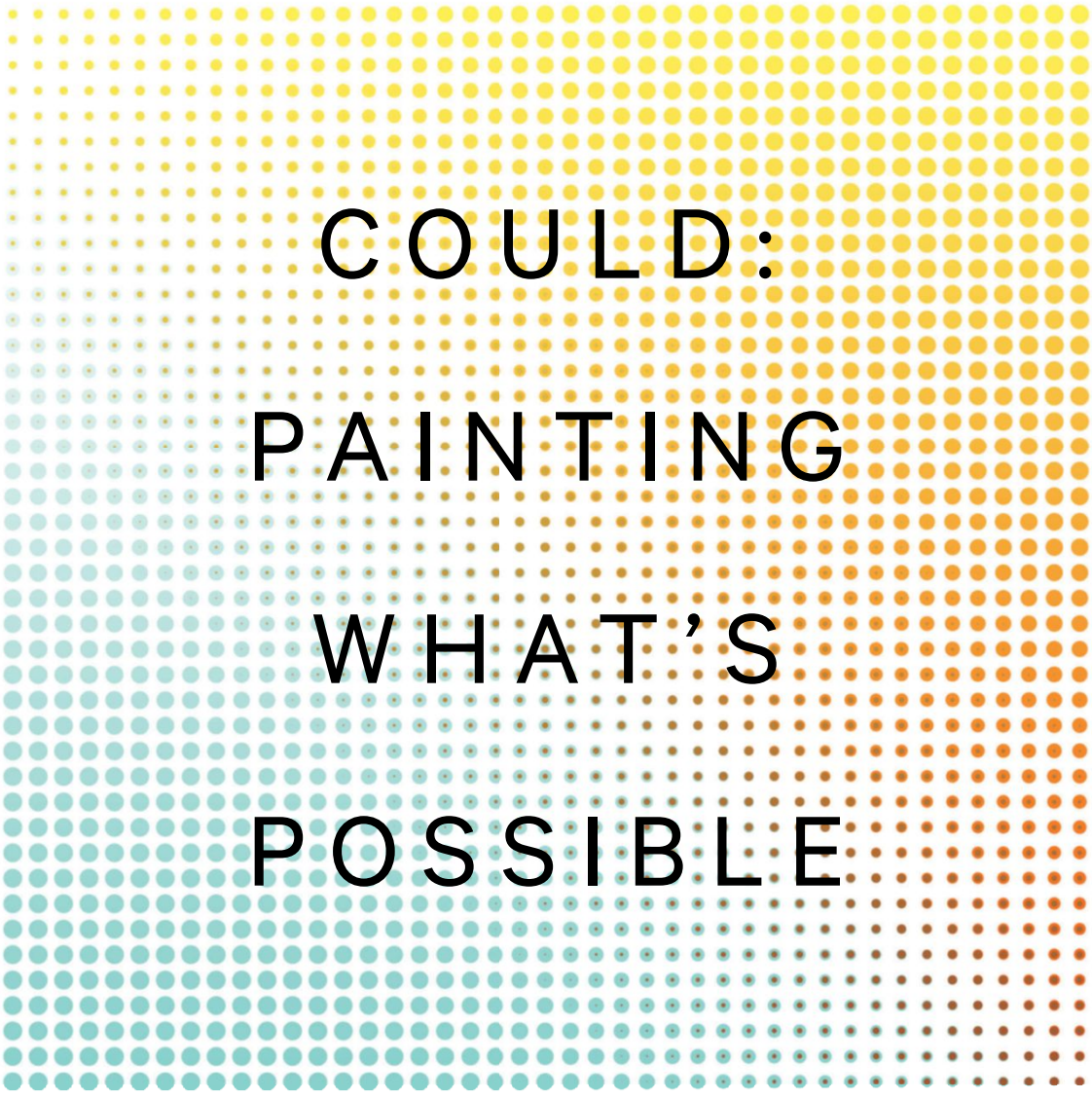
The new climate is slowly being institutionalized, and is affecting what can be said in the classroom, even as a basis for discussion or debate.

However, there is a deeper problem with trigger warnings. According to the most-basic tenets of psychology, the very idea of helping people with anxiety disorders avoid the things they fear is misguided. A person who is trapped in an elevator during a power outage may panic and think she is going to die. That frightening experience can change neural connections in her amygdala, leading to an elevator phobia. If you want this woman to retain her fear for life, you should help her avoid elevators.

But if you want to help her return to normalcy, you should take your cues from Ivan Pavlov and guide her through a process known as exposure therapy. You might start by asking the woman to merely look at an elevator from a distance—standing in a building lobby, perhaps—until her apprehension begins to subside. If nothing bad happens while she's standing in the lobby—if the fear is not "reinforced"—then she will begin to learn a new association: elevators are not dangerous. (This reduction in fear during exposure is called habituation.) Then, on subsequent days, you might ask her to get closer, and on later days to push the call button, and eventually to step in and go up one floor. This is how the amygdala can get rewired again to associate a previously feared situation with safety or normalcy.

Students who call for trigger warnings may be correct that some of their peers are harboring memories of trauma that could be reactivated by course readings. But they are wrong to try to prevent such reactivations. Students with PTSD should

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Jeff Nishinaka's paper sculpture depicting the future of cognitive technology

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Jonathan Haidt's Story

I HAVE STUDIED moral psychology for 28 years. During that time, the American left and right have become like different countries, perpetually at odds. Each side has its own values, of course, but increasingly its own facts, too—about history, economics, climate science. In 2012, I published my most recent book, *The Righteous Mind*, in the hope that if Americans understood the biases that affect their everyday moral thinking, they might be able to understand one another better.

I recently became particularly alarmed by reports about new moralistic trends on college campuses. I began reading about trigger warnings and microaggressions in the spring of 2014, and just weeks later, I started encountering these issues in my own teaching at New York University.

For example, to prepare students for a class discussion on wisdom, I assigned a magazine article that described the dilemmas a physician faced as one of his patients was dying of cancer. A student complained (in the homework assignment) that I should have included a trigger warning, so that students who had lost a relative to cancer could steer clear of the article. In another course, I lectured on weakness of the will, and I described Ulysses's wise leadership in tying himself to the mast of his ship, so he could resist the Sirens' song. I showed a painting of the scene in which the Sirens try but fail to lure Ulysses and his men to their death. Like most mermaids, the Sirens in the painting are topless, and this led to



a complaint (in my teaching evaluations) that the painting was degrading to women, and that I was insensitive for showing it.

Most of my students are not so easily offended. But the relationship of trust between professors and students seems to be weakening as more students become monitors for microaggressions.

I don't mind if students complain directly to me. Each lecture involves hundreds of small decisions, and sometimes I do choose the wrong word or analogy. But nowadays, e-mail and social media make it easier for students to complain directly to campus authorities, or to the Internet at large, than to come talk with their professors. Each complaint can lead to many rounds of meetings, and sometimes to formal charges and investigations.

Increasingly, professors must ask themselves not just *What is the best way to teach this material?* but also *Might the most sensitive student in the class take offense if I say this, and then post it online, and then ruin my career?*

I had been wondering why things seemed to be getting worse so quickly. Then one day last year, Greg Lukianoff came to me with his diagnosis: colleges themselves may be inadvertently teaching distorted thinking. I saw the close connection to moral psychology, and offered to write this essay with him.

HIERONYMOUS

of course get treatment, but they should not try to avoid normal life, with its many opportunities for habituation. Classroom discussions are safe places to be exposed to incidental reminders of trauma (such as the word *violate*). A discussion of violence is unlikely to be followed by actual violence, so it is a good way to help students change the associations that are causing them discomfort. And they'd better get their habituation done in college, because the world beyond college will be far less willing to accommodate requests for trigger warnings and opt-outs.

The expansive use of trigger warnings may also foster unhealthy mental habits in the vastly larger group of students who do not suffer from PTSD or other anxiety disorders. People acquire their fears not just from their own past experiences, but from social learning as well. If everyone around you acts as though something is dangerous—elevators, certain neighborhoods, novels depicting racism—then you are at risk of acquiring that fear too. The psychiatrist Sarah Roff pointed this out last year in an online article for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. "One of my biggest concerns about trigger warnings," Roff wrote, "is that they will apply not just to those who have experienced trauma, but to all students, creating an atmosphere in which they are encouraged to believe that there is something dangerous or damaging about discussing difficult aspects of our history."

In an article published last year by *Inside Higher Ed*, seven humanities professors wrote that the trigger-warning movement was "already having a chilling effect on [their] teaching and pedagogy." They reported their colleagues' receiving "phone calls from deans and other administrators investigating student complaints that they have included 'triggering' material in their courses, with or without warnings." A trigger warning, they wrote, "serves as a guarantee that students will not experience unexpected discomfort and implies that if they do, a contract has been broken." When students come to *expect* trigger warnings for any material that makes them uncomfortable, the easiest way for faculty to stay out of trouble is to avoid material that might upset the most sensitive student in the class.

Magnification, Labeling, and Microaggressions

Burns defines *magnification* as "exaggerat[ing] the importance of things," and Leahy, Holland, and McGinn define *labeling* as "assign[ing] global negative traits to yourself and others." The recent collegiate trend of uncovering allegedly racist, sexist, classist, or otherwise discriminatory microaggressions doesn't *incidentally* teach students to focus on small or accidental slights. Its *purpose* is to get students to focus on them and then relabel the people who have made such remarks as aggressors.

The term *microaggression* originated in the 1970s and referred to subtle, often unconscious racist affronts. The definition has expanded in recent years to include anything that can be perceived as discriminatory on virtually any basis. For example, in 2013, a student group at UCLA staged a sit-in during a class taught by Val Rust, an education professor. The group read a letter aloud expressing their concerns about the

campus's hostility toward students of color. Although Rust was not explicitly named, the group quite clearly criticized his teaching as microaggressive. In the course of correcting his students' grammar and spelling, Rust had noted that a student had wrongly capitalized the first letter of the word *indigenous*. Lowercasing the capital *I* was an insult to the student and her ideology, the group claimed.

Even joking about microaggressions can be seen as an aggression, warranting punishment. Last fall, Omar Mahmood, a student at the University of Michigan, wrote a satirical column for a conservative student publication, *The Michigan Review*, poking fun at what he saw as a campus tendency to perceive microaggressions in just about anything. Mahmood was also employed at the campus newspaper, *The Michigan Daily*. *The Daily*'s editors said that the way Mahmood had "satirically mocked the experiences of fellow Daily contributors and minority communities on campus ... created a conflict of interest." *The Daily* terminated Mahmood after he described the incident to two Web sites, The College Fix and The Daily Caller. A group of women later vandalized Mahmood's doorway with eggs, hot dogs, gum, and notes with messages such as "Everyone hates you, you violent prick." When speech comes to be seen as a form of violence, vindictive protectiveness can justify a hostile, and perhaps even violent, response.

monsters." Leahy, Holland, and McGinn define it as believing "that what has happened or will happen" is "so awful and unbearable that you won't be able to stand it." Requests for trigger warnings involve catastrophizing, but this way of thinking colors other areas of campus thought as well.

Catastrophizing rhetoric about physical danger is employed by campus administrators more commonly than you might think—sometimes, it seems, with cynical ends in mind. For instance, last year administrators at Bergen Community College, in New Jersey, suspended Francis Schmidt, a professor, after he posted a picture of his daughter on his Google+ account. The photo showed her in a yoga pose, wearing a T-shirt that read I WILL TAKE WHAT IS MINE WITH FIRE & BLOOD, a quote from the HBO show *Game of Thrones*. Schmidt had filed a grievance against the school about two months earlier after being passed over for a sabbatical. The quote was interpreted as a threat by a campus administrator, who received a notification after Schmidt posted the picture; it had been sent, automatically, to a whole group of contacts. According to Schmidt, a Bergen security official present at a subsequent meeting between administrators and Schmidt thought the word *fire* could refer to AK-47s.

Then there is the eight-year legal saga at Valdosta State University, in Georgia, where a student was expelled for

What are we doing to our students if we encourage them to develop extra-thin skin just before they leave the cocoon of adult protection?

In March, the student government at Ithaca College, in upstate New York, went so far as to propose the creation of an anonymous microaggression-reporting system. Student sponsors envisioned some form of disciplinary action against "oppressors" engaged in belittling speech. One of the sponsors of the program said that while "not ... every instance will require trial or some kind of harsh punishment," she wanted the program to be "record-keeping but with impact."

Surely people make subtle or thinly veiled racist or sexist remarks on college campuses, and it is right for students to raise questions and initiate discussions about such cases. But the increased focus on microaggressions coupled with the endorsement of emotional reasoning is a formula for a constant state of outrage, even toward well-meaning speakers trying to engage in genuine discussion.

What are we doing to our students if we encourage them to develop extra-thin skin in the years just before they leave the cocoon of adult protection and enter the workforce? Would they not be better prepared to flourish if we taught them to question their own emotional reactions, and to give people the benefit of the doubt?

Teaching Students to Catastrophize and Have Zero Tolerance

Burns defines *catastrophizing* as a kind of magnification that turns "commonplace negative events into nightmarish

protesting the construction of a parking garage by posting an allegedly "threatening" collage on Facebook. The collage described the proposed structure as a "memorial" parking garage—a joke referring to a claim by the university president that the garage would be part of his legacy. The president interpreted the collage as a threat against his life.

It should be no surprise that students are exhibiting similar sensitivity. At the University of Central Florida in 2013, for example, Hyung-il Jung, an accounting instructor, was suspended after a student reported that Jung had made a threatening comment during a review session. Jung explained to the *Orlando Sentinel* that the material he was reviewing was difficult, and he'd noticed the pained look on students' faces, so he made a joke. "It looks like you guys are being slowly suffocated by these questions," he recalled saying. "Am I on a killing spree or what?"

After the student reported Jung's comment, a group of nearly 20 others e-mailed the UCF administration explaining that the comment had clearly been made in jest. Nevertheless, UCF suspended Jung from all university duties and demanded that he obtain written certification from a mental-health professional that he was "not a threat to [himself] or to the university community" before he would be allowed to return to campus.

All of these actions teach a common lesson: smart people do, in fact, overreact to innocuous speech, make mountains

out of molehills, and seek punishment for anyone whose words make anyone else feel uncomfortable.

Mental Filtering and Disinvitation Season

As Burns defines it, *mental filtering* is "pick[ing] out a negative detail in any situation and dwell[ing] on it exclusively, thus perceiving that the whole situation is negative." Leahy, Holland, and McGinn refer to this as "negative filtering," which they define as "focus[ing] almost exclusively on the negatives and seldom notic[ing] the positives." When applied to campus life, mental filtering allows for simpleminded demonization.

Students and faculty members in large numbers modeled this cognitive distortion during 2014's "disinvitation season." That's the time of year—usually early spring—when commencement speakers are announced and when students and professors demand that some of those speakers be disinvited because of things they have said or done. According to data compiled by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, since 2000, at least 240 campaigns have been launched at U.S. universities to prevent public figures from appearing at campus events; most of them have occurred since 2009.

Consider two of the most prominent disinvitation targets of 2014: former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and the International Monetary Fund's managing director, Christine Lagarde. Rice was the first black female secretary of state; Lagarde was the first woman to become finance minister of a G8 country and the first female head of the IMF. Both speakers could have been seen as highly successful role models for female students, and Rice for minority students as well. But the critics, in effect, discounted any possibility of something positive coming from those speeches.

Members of an academic community should of course be free to raise questions about Rice's role in the Iraq War or to look skeptically at the IMF's policies. But should dislike of part of a person's record disqualify her altogether from sharing her perspectives?

If campus culture conveys the idea that visitors must be pure, with résumés that never offend generally left-leaning campus sensibilities, then higher education will have taken a further step toward intellectual homogeneity and the creation of an environment in which students rarely encounter diverse viewpoints. And universities will have reinforced the belief that it's okay to filter out the positive. If students graduate believing that they can learn nothing from people they dislike or from those with whom they disagree, we will have done them a great intellectual disservice.

What Can We Do Now?

Attempts to shield students from words, ideas, and people that might cause them emotional discomfort are bad for the students. They are bad for the workplace, which will be mired in unending litigation if student expectations of safety are carried forward. And they are bad for American democracy, which is already paralyzed by worsening partisanship. When the ideas, values, and speech of the other side are seen not just as wrong but as willfully aggressive toward innocent victims, it is hard to imagine the kind of mutual respect, negotiation, and compromise that are needed to make politics a positive-sum game.

Rather than trying to protect students from words and ideas that they will inevitably encounter, colleges should do all they

Common Cognitive Distortions

A partial list from Robert L. Leahy, Stephen J. F. Holland, and Lata K. McGinn's *Treatment Plans and Interventions for Depression and Anxiety Disorders* (2012).

1. Mind reading. You assume that you know what people think without having sufficient evidence of their thoughts. "He thinks I'm a loser."

2. Fortune-telling. You predict the future negatively: things will get worse, or there is danger ahead. "I'll fail that exam," or "I won't get the job."

3. Catastrophizing. You believe that what has happened or will happen will be so awful and unbearable that you won't be able to stand it. "It would be terrible if I failed."

4. Labeling. You assign global negative traits to yourself and others. "I'm undesirable," or "He's a rotten person."

5. Discounting positives. You claim that the positive things you or others do are trivial. "That's what wives are supposed to do—so it doesn't count when she's nice to me," or "Those successes were easy, so they don't matter."

6. Negative filtering. You focus almost exclusively on the negatives and seldom notice the positives. "Look at all of the people who don't like me."

7. Overgeneralizing. You perceive a global pattern of negatives on the basis of a single incident. "This generally happens to me. I seem to fail at a lot of things."

8. Dichotomous thinking. You view events or people in all-or-nothing terms. "I get rejected by everyone," or "It was a complete waste of time."

9. Blaming. You focus on the other person as the source of your negative feelings, and you refuse to take responsibility for changing yourself. "She's to blame for the way I feel now," or "My parents caused all my problems."

10. What if? You keep asking a series of questions about "what if" something happens, and you fail to be satisfied with any of the answers. "Yeah, but what if I get anxious?," or "What if I can't catch my breath?"

11. Emotional reasoning. You let your feelings guide your interpretation of reality. "I feel depressed; therefore, my marriage is not working out."

12. Inability to disconfirm. You reject any evidence or arguments that might contradict your negative thoughts. For example, when you have the thought *I'm unlovable,* you reject as irrelevant any evidence that people like you. Consequently, your thought cannot be refuted. "That's not the real issue. There are deeper problems. There are other factors."

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can to equip students to thrive in a world full of words and ideas that they cannot control. One of the great truths taught by Buddhism (and Stoicism, Hinduism, and many other traditions) is that you can never achieve happiness by making the world conform to your desires. But you can master your desires and habits of thought. This, of course, is the goal of cognitive behavioral therapy. With this in mind, here are some steps that might help reverse the tide of bad thinking on campus.

The biggest single step in the right direction does not involve faculty or university administrators, but rather the federal government, which should release universities from their fear of unreasonable investigation and sanctions by the Department of Education. Congress should define peer-on-peer harassment according to the Supreme Court's definition in the 1999 case *Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education*. The *Davis* standard holds that a single comment or thoughtless remark by a student does not equal harassment; harassment requires a pattern of objectively offensive behavior by one student that interferes with another student's access to education. Establishing the *Davis* standard would help eliminate universities' impulse to police their students' speech so carefully.

Universities themselves should try to raise consciousness about the need to balance freedom of speech with the need to make all students feel welcome. Talking openly about such conflicting but important values is just the sort of challenging exercise that any diverse but tolerant community must learn to do. Restrictive speech codes should be abandoned.

Universities should also officially and strongly discourage trigger warnings. They should endorse the American Association of University Professors' report on these warnings, which notes, "The presumption that students need to be protected rather than challenged in a classroom is at once infantilizing and anti-intellectual." Professors should be free to use trigger warnings if they choose to do so, but by explicitly discouraging the practice, universities would help fortify the faculty against student requests for such warnings.

Finally, universities should rethink the skills and values they most want to impart to their incoming students. At present, many freshman-orientation programs try to raise student sensitivity to a nearly impossible level. Teaching students to avoid giving unintentional offense is a worthy goal, especially when the students come from many different cultural backgrounds. But students should also be taught how to live in a world full of potential offenses. Why not teach incoming students how to practice cognitive behavioral therapy? Given high and rising rates of mental illness, this simple step would be among the most humane and supportive things a university could do. The cost and time commitment could be kept low: a few group training sessions could be supplemented by Web sites or apps. But the outcome could pay dividends in many ways. For example, a shared vocabulary about reasoning, common distortions, and the appropriate use of evidence to draw conclusions would facilitate critical thinking and real debate. It would also tone down the perpetual state of outrage that seems to engulf some colleges these days, allowing students' minds to open more widely to new ideas and new people. A greater commitment to formal, public debate on campus—and to the assembly of a more politically diverse faculty—would further serve that goal.

DUE DILIGENCE

They didn't do their due diligence.
They didn't do it,
And now they rue it,
And how they will rue not doing it
With vigilance when they had the chance.
They talked the talk but didn't dance the dance.

They committed the folly
Of failing to follow the lolly.
They didn't learn about the booze,
They didn't learn about the flooze,
The smack, the jack, and the lolly.
And, in short, they missed the trolley.

They overlooked some obvious flaws.
Why? Was it arrogance
Or the need to spare the expense
Or just a lack of common sense?
Who can say? Whatever the cause,
They failed to observe the clause.

They didn't do their due diligence.
They didn't do it,
And now they rue it,
And how they will rue not doing it,
How they will rue the day
They didn't do their due diligence.

— David Lehman

David Lehman is the author, most recently, of The State of the Art: A Chronicle of American Poetry, 1988–2014. *His new book,* Sinatra's Century: One Hundred Notes on the Man and His World, *will be published in October.*

Thomas Jefferson, upon founding the University of Virginia, said:

> This institution will be based on the illimitable freedom of the human mind. For here we are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it.

We believe that this is still—and will always be—the best attitude for American universities. Faculty, administrators, students, and the federal government all have a role to play in restoring universities to their historic mission. *A*

Greg Lukianoff is the president and CEO of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education and the author of Unlearning Liberty. *Jonathan Haidt is a professor in the Business and Society Program at New York University's Stern School of Business. He is the author of* The Righteous Mind *and* The Happiness Hypothesis.

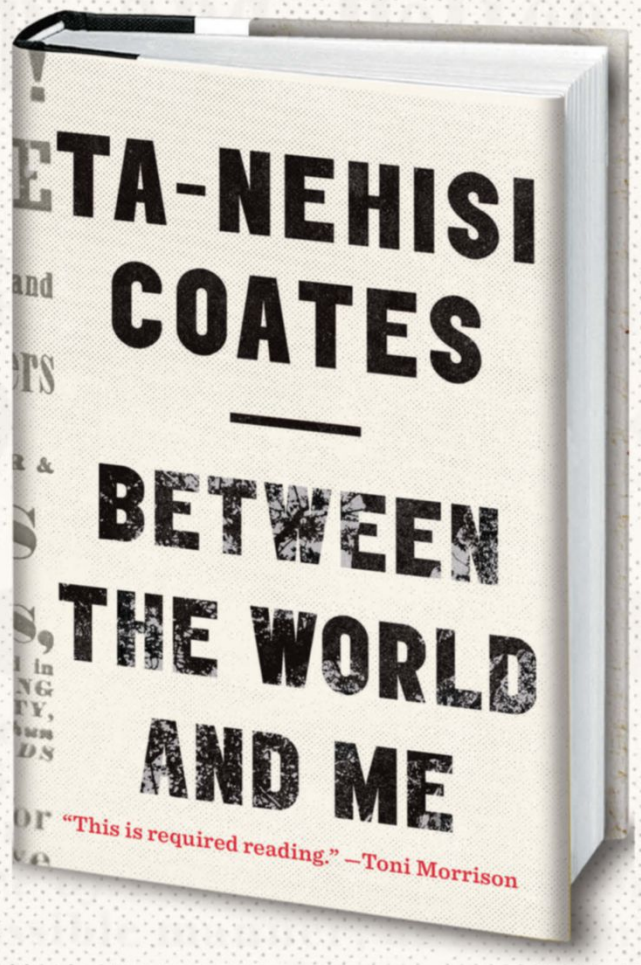
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That's Not Funny!



Today's college students can't seem to take a joke.

By Caitlin Flanagan

Illustrations by Kristian Hammerstad

THREE COMICS SAT around a café table in the chilly atrium of the Minneapolis Convention Center, talking about how to create the cleanest possible set. "Don't do what's in your gut," Zoltan Kaszas said. "Better safe than sorry," Chinedu Unaka offered. Feraz Ozel mused about the first time he'd ever done stand-up: three minutes on giving his girlfriend herpes and banging his grandma. That was out.

This was not a case of professionals approaching a technical problem as an intellectual exercise. Money was riding on the answer. They had come to Minneapolis in the middle of a brutal winter for the annual convention of the National Association for Campus Activities (NACA), to sell themselves and their comedy on the college circuit. Representatives of more than 350 colleges had come as well, to book comics, musicians, sword swallowers, unicyclists, magicians, hypnotists, slam poets, and every kind of boat act, inspirational speaker, and one-trick pony you could imagine for the next academic year.

For the comics, the college circuit offers a lucrative alternative to Chuckle Hut gigs out on the pitiless road, spots that pay a couple hundred bucks and a free night in whatever squat the club owner uses to warehouse out-of-town talent. College gigs pay easily a grand a night—often much more—and they can come in a firecracker string, with relatively short drives between schools, each hour-long performance paid for (without a moment's ugliness or hesitation) by a friendly student-activities kid holding out a check and hoping for a selfie. For all these reasons, thousands of comics dream of being invited to the convention.

The colleges represented were—to use a word that their emissaries regard as numinous—diverse: huge research universities, tiny liberal-arts colleges, Catholic schools, land-grant institutions. But the students' taste in entertainment was uniform. They liked their slam poets to deliver the goods in tones of the highest seriousness and on subjects of lunar bleakness; they favored musicians who could turn out covers with cheerful precision; and they wanted comedy that was 100 percent risk-free, comedy that could not trigger or upset or mildly trouble a single student. They wanted comedy so



thoroughly scrubbed of barb and aggression that if the most hypersensitive weirdo on campus mistakenly wandered into a performance, the words he would hear would fall on him like a soft rain, producing a gentle chuckle and encouraging him to toddle back to his dorm, tuck himself in, and commence a dreamless sleep—not text Mom and Dad that some monster had upset him with a joke.

Two of the most respected American comedians, Chris Rock and Jerry Seinfeld, have discussed the unique problems that comics face on college campuses. In November, Rock told Frank Rich in an interview for *New York* magazine that he no longer plays colleges, because they're "too conservative." He didn't necessarily mean that the students were Republican; he meant that they were far too eager "not to offend anybody." In college gigs, he said, "you can't even be offensive on your way to being inoffensive." Then, in June, Seinfeld reopened the debate—and set off a frenzied round of op-eds—when he said in a radio interview that comics warn him not to "go near colleges—they're so PC."



When I attended the convention in Minneapolis in February, I saw ample evidence of the repressive atmosphere that Rock and Seinfeld described, as well as another, not unrelated factor: the infantilization of the American undergraduate, and this character's evolving status in the world of higher learning—less a student than a consumer, someone whose whims and affectations (political, sexual, pseudo-intellectual) must be constantly supported and championed. To understand this change, it helps to think of college not as an institution of scholarly pursuit but as the all-inclusive resort that it has in recent years become—and then to think of the undergraduate who drops out or transfers as an early checkout. Keeping hold of that kid for all four years has become a central obsession of the higher-ed-industrial complex. How do you do it? In part, by importing enough jesters and bards to keep him from wandering away to someplace more entertaining, taking his Pell grant and his 529 plan and his student loans with him.

But which jesters, which bards? Ones who can handle the challenge. Because when you put all of these forces together—political correctness, coddling, and the need to keep kids at once amused and unoffended (not to mention the absence of a two-drink minimum and its crowd-lubricating effect)—the black-box theater of an obscure liberal-arts college deep in flyover territory may just be the toughest comedy room in the country.

"You can't use logic on these people," Geoff Keith told me over dinner at the Hilton, "or then they think you're a dick." He was about to walk through one of the frigid skyways connecting a cluster of downtown hotels to the Minneapolis Convention Center, where he would perform for 1,000 potential buyers, but he evinced not a trace of anxiety other than to glance at his iPhone now and then to make sure he wasn't late.

Keith is one of the kings of the college circuit. A few years ago, he was the most-booked college comic, playing 120 campuses. He charges $2,300 for a single performance.

Keith is 31, fast-witted and handsome, possessed of an acute and often witheringly precise ability to assess people and situations. He rocketed into comedy at a young age; at 22 he spent a year and a half on the road, performing with a popular headliner: Pablo Francisco, who let him do half an hour, and allowed him to tell filthy stories onstage. (Keith was a good-looking kid working big gigs in Vegas and Dallas and Chicago; he wasn't short on filthy stories.) For a while he was in danger of becoming too dirty for mainstream audiences, but he's smart and ambitious, so he toned down his material, put together a television reel, and sharpened his crowd work. He now has TV credits and a following. He lives in Los Angeles, where he kills at clubs, goes on auditions, and waits—impatiently, as do all the young and talented people in Hollywood who have passed 30—for the big break.

Until then, there's the college market, and the logic problem. Trying to explain to these kids any of the fundamental truths of standup—from why it's not a good idea to hold a comedy show in the cafeteria during lunch hour, to why jokes involving gay people aren't necessarily homophobic—is a nonstarter, and only serves to antagonize the customers. The logic problem is also responsible for the fact that many of the comics at the convention weren't very funny, and several of those who *were* funny didn't get much work, despite garnering huge laughs and even standing ovations.

A young gay man with a Broadway background named Kevin Yee sang novelty songs about his life, producing a delirium of affection from the audience. "We love you, Kevin!" a group of kids yelled between numbers. He invited students to the front of the auditorium for a "gay dance party," and they charged down to take part. His last song, about the close relationship that can develop between a gay man and his "sassy black friend," was a killer closer; the kids roared in delight, and several African American young women in the crowd seemed to be self-identifying as sassy black friends. I assumed Yee would soon be barnstorming the country. But afterward, two white students from an Iowa college shook their heads: no. He was "perpetuating stereotypes," one of them said, firmly. "We're a very forward-thinking school," she told me. "That thing about the 'sassy black friend'? That wouldn't work for us." Many others, apparently, felt the same way: Yee ended up with 18 bookings—a respectable showing, but hardly a reflection of the excitement in the room when he performed.

If your goal were simply to bring great comics to a college campus, it would be easily accomplished. You would gather the school's comedy nerds, give them a budget, and tell them to book the best acts they could afford. But then you'd have Doug Stanhope explaining to religious kids that there's no God, or Dennis Miller telling an audience of social-justice warriors that France's efforts to limit junk food in schools are part of the country's "master plan to raise healthier cowards." You would have, in other words, performers whose desire is not to soothe an audience but to unsettle it, performers who hew to Roseanne Barr's understanding of comedy: "I love stand-up. I'm totally addicted to it," she once said. "It's free speech. It's all that's left."

College campuses have never been incubators for great stand-up; during the 1960s and '70s, schools didn't dedicate much money to bringing in entertainers, and by the time they did, PC culture had taken off. This culture—its noble aspirations and inevitable end game—was everywhere apparent at the convention. In the lavishly produced, 144-page brochure, I found a densely written block of text that began with a trumpet blast of idealism—"NACA is committed to advancing diversity development and the principles of equal opportunity and affirmative action through its respective programs"—but wound down to a muffled fart of unintended consequences: "There is no intent to support censorship."

Bringing great artists to colleges is not NACA's mission. Its mission involves presenting for potential employment on American campuses a group of entertainers whose work upholds a set of ideas that has been codified by bureaucrats. And in the comedians' desperate attempts to grasp the realpolitik of the college market—and to somehow reverse engineer an act catered to it—you could see why stand-up is such a singular form: it is mercilessly ineffective as agitprop.

"We're a very forward-thinking school. That thing about the 'sassy black friend'? That wouldn't work for us."

BECAUSE THE INCLINATION to hold a convention in Minneapolis in February is not widely shared, the convention center was largely deserted and dystopian. Homeless men, some wearing hospital gowns and ID bracelets under their parkas, slunk quietly inside to keep warm, although if they panhandled or menaced anyone they were bounced back onto the urban tundra by security guards. Vast expanses of the structure loomed in all directions, and empty escalators wheeled ever upward. During the day, "educational sessions" on topics of inexpressible tedium—"Wave Goodbye to Low Volunteer Retention"—droned on, testament (as are the educational sessions of a hundred other conferences) to the fact that the growth field in higher education is not Elizabethan literature or organic chemistry but mid-level administration.

All of this was enlivened—mightily—by the fact that the doors of the main auditorium regularly swung open for two-hour variety shows. These shows were like episodes of *America's Got Talent*—jolly and sparkly, sometimes diverting and sometimes wearisome—but in contrast to the lectures on volunteer retention, the gloomy convention center, and the gelid metropolis beyond, they came to seem like examples of the highest reaches of human achievement, and it was not mere journalistic zeal that had me thundering down the main aisle to grab a good seat for each new showcase.

The kids in the audience belonged to their schools' student-activities committees, and had thus been appointed the task of picking the paid entertainment for the next year. I found them, as a type, to be cheerful, helpful, rule-following, and nerdy. They were also—in the best sense of a loaded word—inclusive. "We don't want to sponsor an event that would offend anyone," Courtney Bennett, the incoming president of the student-activities board at Western Michigan University, told me. The NACA kids were impossible not to like, although nothing about them suggested a natural talent for identifying original forms of artistic expression. They would cluster around their grown-up advisers like flocks of ducklings to powwow about the performers they had seen. Then, with the casual ease of people spending someone else's money, they would use an app to blast potential dates to the artists they liked. These were the buyers, then: one half of the equation.

The entertainers were the other half. They had come to the event on their own dime, and were trying to do whatever it took to please these young people so that they could get some road work. Their first step might have been to read the convention brochure. NACA, it explained, is dedicated to "promoting the importance" of "eliminating" any language that is "discriminatory or culturally insensitive."

O, Utopia. Why must your sweet governance always turn so quickly from the Edenic to the Stalinist? The college revolutions of the 1960s—the ones that gave rise to the social-justice warriors of today's campuses—were fueled by free speech. But once you've won a culture war, free speech is a nuisance, and "eliminating" language becomes a necessity.

The process begins, as such processes always do, in a committee of "undisclosed members." In the fall, an anonymous group of staff and volunteers reviews hundreds of submission tapes to determine which performers will get to showcase their acts at the convention. What this seemed to boil down to, when I looked at the slate of performers who had gotten a golden ticket, was that comics who even gestured toward the insensitive had been screened out, and those whose racial or ethnic background contributed to the diversity of the slate had been given special consideration.

There were comics of Nigerian, Afghan Pakistani, Indian, Hispanic, and Korean–African American heritage. Some were very good. But others barely had the 15 minutes necessary for a showcase; it was hard to believe they would have the hour needed for college work. Many of these younger artists thought that if they could just get the gigs off this audition, they could then do their regular club act once they showed up on campus. They were mistaken. Tell a joke that upsets the kids, and the next morning the student-activities director is going to be on the phone: to your agent, to NACA, and—more crucially—to his or her co-equals at the other four colleges in the region that you booked.

Geoff Keith had counseled Chinedu Unaka and Feraz Ozel

not only to work clean, but also to confine any jokes about ethnicity to their own heritage. Unaka delivered an original and interesting set about growing up black in Los Angeles, the son of Nigerian—not African American—parents; Ozel, whose family is Middle Eastern, also did a bit about his cultural background. They were both well received, but they earned few bookings. Who could predict how such jokes would go over back on campus? Zoltan Kaszas, on the other hand, did a cheerful, anodyne set about Costco, camping, and pets. He was the breakout star of the convention. "Look at him," one student group's adviser said to me as more than 40 campus reps clamored for a visit from Kaszas. "His career just got made." Another victory for better-safe-than-sorry.

As I listened to the kids hash out whom to invite, it became clear that to get work, a comic had to be at once funny—genuinely funny—and also deeply respectful of a particular set of beliefs. These beliefs included, but were in no way limited to, the following: women, as a group, should never be made to feel uncomfortable; people whose sexual orientation falls beyond the spectrum of heterosexuality must be reassured of their special value; racial injustice is best addressed in tones of bitter anguish or inspirational calls to action; Muslims are friendly helpers whom we should cherish; and belonging to any potentially "marginalized" community involves a crippling hypersensitivity that must always be respected.

The students' determination to avoid booking any acts that might conceivably hurt the feelings of a classmate was in its way quite admirable. They seemed wholly animated by kindness and by an open-mindedness to the many varieties of the human experience. But the flip side of this sensitivity is the savagery with which reputations and even academic careers can be destroyed by a single comment—perhaps thoughtless, perhaps misinterpreted, perhaps (God help you) intended as a joke—that violates the values of the herd.

When you talk with college students outside of formal settings, many reveal nuanced opinions on the issues that NACA was so anxious to police. But almost all of them have internalized the code that you don't laugh at politically incorrect statements; you complain about them. In part, this is because they are the inheritors of three decades of identity politics, which have come to be a central driver of attitudes on college campuses. But there's more to it than that. These kids aren't dummies; they look around their colleges and see that there are huge incentives to join the ideological bandwagon and harsh penalties for questioning the platform's core ideas.

Meanwhile—as obvious reaction to all of this—frat boys and other campus punksters regularly flout the thought police by staging events along elaborately racist themes, events that, while patently vile, are beginning to constitute the free-speech movement of our time. The closest you're going to get to Mario Savio—sick at heart about the operation of the machine and willing to throw himself upon its gears and levers—is less the campus president of Human Rights Watch than the moron over at Phi Sigma Kappa who plans the Colonial Bros and Nava-Hos mixer.

To get work, a comic had to be genuinely funny—and also deeply respectful of a particular set of beliefs.

After Geoff Keith and I finished dinner, we made our way to the auditorium and fell in with a group of other comics who were heading over to catch his set. Keith is deeply respected in this crowd: he may still be developing his career in the real comedy world, the one where you perform for grown-ups, but he can book as many colleges as he wants.

Keith was dressed not in the understated clothing he wears in comedy clubs, but in an almost clownish getup: bright-pink pants, a green shirt, a polka-dot tie. The outfit was strategic—he didn't want a kid forgetting his name and booking the wrong comic; he would remind the audience to think of him as the guy in the pink pants. Instead of performing for 15 minutes, he would cut his set short at the first big laugh after the 12-minute mark, so that the act would seem to fly by. He would tell jokes about his fiancée's strict father, and getting out of jury duty, and tricking someone by using an English accent. The students would love him, and book him in great numbers, as they always do.

But he would not tell the jokes that kill at the clubs. He would not do the bit that ends with him offering oral sex to the magician David Copperfield, or the one about a seductive woman warning him that she might be an ax murderer, or the one about why men don't like to use condoms. Those jokes include observations about power and sex and even rape—and each, in its complicated way, addresses certain ugly and possibly immutable truths. But they are jokes, not lessons from the gender-studies classroom. Their first objective is to be funny, not to service any philosophical ideal. They go where comedy always wants to go, to the darkness, and they sucker-punch you with a laugh when you don't think you should laugh.

And maybe you shouldn't. These young people have decided that some subjects—among them rape and race—are so serious that they shouldn't be fodder for comics. They want a world that's less cruel; they want to play a game that isn't rigged in favor of the powerful. And it's their student-activities money, after all—they have every right to hire the exact type of entertainment that matches their beliefs. Still, there's always a price to pay for walling off discussion of certain thoughts and ideas. Drive those ideas underground, especially the dark ones, and they fester.

Sarah Silverman has described the laugh that comes with a "mouth full of blood"—the hearty laugh from the person who understands your joke not as a critique of some vile notion but as an endorsement of it. It's the essential peril of comedy, as performers from Dave Chappelle to, most recently, Amy Schumer understand all too well. But to enroll in college and discover that for almost every aspect of your experience—right down to the stand-up comics who tell jokes in the student union—great care has been taken to expose you to only the narrowest range of approved social and political opinions: that's the mouth full of blood right there. *A*

Caitlin Flanagan is an Atlantic *contributing editor.*

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HAVANA ON THE BRINK

City officials are striking a difficult balance between preserving the historic district as a residential neighborhood and reviving its tourist industry. What happens when the Americans arrive?

By **HENRY GRABAR**

Photographs by **LISETTE POOLE**



At the turn of the millennium, only one in three housing units in Old Havana was in good condition; in the early aughts, a partial or complete building collapse was recorded every day. Today, tourists throng the district's cafés and boutiques.





1

OLD HAVANA,

the historic district of Cuba's capital, was founded by Spanish colonists in 1519. Its churches and fortresses carved from white limestone, Triangle Trade–era mansions, and airy courtyards tell a story of centuries of wealth and its expression by Cuba's military and mercantile elite. But the district lost prominence in the early 20th century as economic growth shifted away from the city center, and by the time of the Cuban Revolution in the 1950s—when the country started to shut out foreign visitors, who once packed its bars and beaches—it had fallen into disrepair.

Today, Old Havana is the site of one of the world's most ambitious urban-revival projects. The force behind this transformation is Eusebio Leal Spengler, the city's chief historian. In the early 1990s, when the collapse of the Soviet Union pitched Cuba into economic crisis, Leal persuaded President Fidel Castro to approve the establishment of a tourist-management company, called Habaguanex, that would bring foreign investment back to the island. Since then, Leal's office claims to have steered more than half a billion dollars to the historic district and created more than 13,000 jobs. Habaguanex controls some 20 hotels, 40 restaurants, and 50 bars and cafés, as well as dozens of stores that include a French pastry shop, a florist, and a United Colors of Benetton. Thousands of tourists now arrive each day in Old Havana, an area covering less than a square mile, making it the nation's most popular destination for foreigners.

It has been a spectacular turnaround—but also an unsettling one. Although Castro said he wanted to restore the tourism industry as a "gold mine through which the country can obtain foreign exchange," he regarded its cultural and financial influence on Cubans themselves with extreme caution. Until 2008, when Castro ceded power to his younger brother, the government forbade Cubans to stay in tourist hotels, including the grand Habaguanex lodges in Old Havana—part of a policy that Castro's critics called tourism apartheid.

Leal sees nothing subversive about filling the streets with foreign visitors. To the contrary, he has described his project as the next chapter in the Cuban Revolution. Part of every dollar tourists spend at shops and restaurants pays to

1. A tour-bus driver smokes outside El Floridita, the bar where Ernest Hemingway drank daiquiris in the 1930s. The nearby Ambos Mundos Hotel, where Hemingway started writing *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, was one of Eusebio Leal Spengler's first renovation projects after Habaguanex was founded.

2. Since the 1990s, as hotels and restaurants have surrounded Old Havana's ancient plazas, the Office of the Historian has restored hundreds of residential buildings in the historic district and funded new primary schools, maternity wards, and other public projects.

3. An Habaguanex perfume shop on Obispo Street. A central tenet of Leal's project is to avoid turning Old Havana into an urban museum, like Venice and other tourist-dominated European sites.

2



3



restore buildings that host museums, libraries, schools, and clinics; new hotels for foreigners fund new housing for locals. Leal's approach to restoration—capitalist tactics for socialist results—has been resoundingly praised by the international architecture community.

But it has also heightened the contrast between squalor and splendor, creating a stark division in a land of supposed equals. Two-thirds of Old Havana remains unrestored, and blocks away from the new restaurants and souvenir shops, residents still live in tenements that threaten to collapse around them. Others have been displaced from their homes as the renovation has progressed. Opportunities for corruption abound. The thaw in U.S.-Cuba relations, expected to release big flows of tourists and capital, will likely accelerate the area's changes. Will more outside money help Leal preserve Old Havana's character—or hasten its decline?



4



8



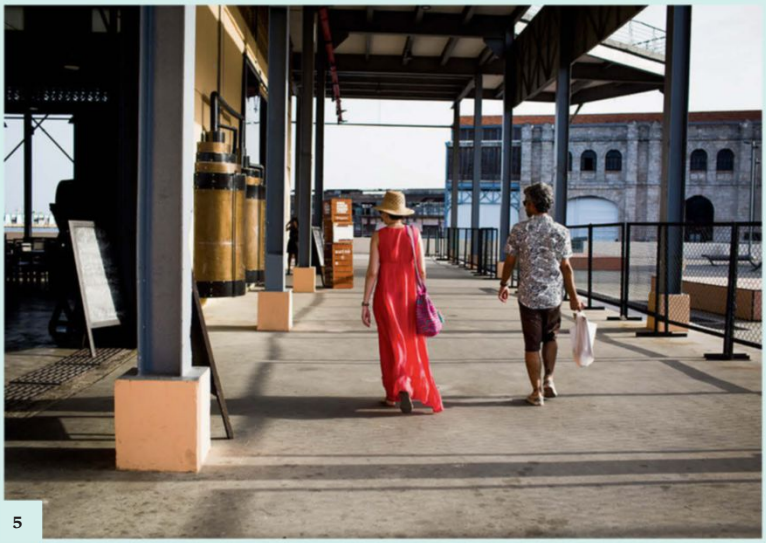
4. The lobby bar of the Hotel Saratoga, which hosted Beyoncé and Jay Z in 2013.

5. A new restaurant by the waterfront accepts only convertible pesos—a currency designed for foreign visitors and investors—which are much more valuable than the pesos the Cuban government issues its citizens.

6. The interior of El Floridita

7. The apartment building at 360 San Ignacio once housed more than 40 families. After being renovated by Leal's office a few years ago, it now houses 15 families and, on the ground floor, a Lacoste store.

8. The historic district has a population density higher than that of Manhattan, and many buildings remain dangerously overcrowded and run-down. "*Habana Vieja* is like a woman in rouge," one resident told me. "Very pretty on the outside, and destroyed on the inside."



5



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11



9. Osniel Gonzalez (*left*) and Alberto Castillo on the balcony of their apartment building, a few blocks from the Hotel Saratoga. In June, the fourth-floor stairway collapsed. Later the same day, Castillo's ceiling caved in.

10. A neighbor crawls through smashed shutters into Castillo's apartment, which he reached by scaling the roof of the building next door. This window is now the only way that the dozens of fourth-floor residents can reach their apartments.

11. Some Habaneros are reluctant to relocate from their crumbling homes as Leal's project moves forward—especially now that they anticipate a boom in American visitors. "Right now, everyone is trying to create a business related to tourists," says Daniel de la Regata, an architect who worked for several years in Leal's office. "They'd rather have money in their pocket than a good place to live."

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Editor's Note

A CULTURE OF VIOLENCE

***By* JAMES BENNET**

IN THIS ISSUE, on page 92, we've published the winner of the annual high-school essay contest that *The Atlantic* is conducting with the College Board. Nicolas Yan, who is 17, was certainly not the only young writer to take as his subject Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech during the March on Washington, but he distinguished his work with the subtlety of his analysis and the sensitivity with which he evoked the moment: the summer heat, the restlessness of the crowd, the violence then building around King and the civil-rights movement. Reading this essay might also evoke, in some readers, memories of what it was like to be awakening to one's powers as a teenager, and to be stirred by King's genius, and the promise of his dream.

Not every child has the same reaction. Growing up in the 1980s in West Baltimore, Ta-Nehisi Coates was more puzzled than moved by King's message. It had so little bearing on the terrorized world he knew, a world where a child with a gun had "the power to banish other children to memory." As Coates writes in his new book, *Between the World and Me*—adapted in this issue on page 82 as "Letter to My Son"—Black History Month could not go by without perplexing paeans to the virtues of turning the other cheek, without "a series of films dedicated to the glories of being beaten on camera." Yet most other signals in his life informed him that violence was the force most to be respected, if not honored. His childhood was governed by violence and shaped by the fear of it. "How could they send us out into the streets of Baltimore, knowing all that they were, and then speak of nonviolence?"

Even though crime rates have declined, the brutality Coates feared as a child has continued to plague inner cities across the United States. In New Orleans, Mayor Mitch Landrieu has made it his mission to stop the killing. Jeffrey Goldberg reports on page 70 that Landrieu is horrified by what he sees as national indifference to murder on an epidemic scale: "We have basically given up on our African American boys," he told Goldberg. He is taking pains to understand what he calls a culture of violence among young black men. "If I could just understand why these guys did what they did," Landrieu muttered as he toured the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, where the fathers and grandfathers of thousands of New Orleans children are imprisoned, many for life.

Coates sees no great mystery here. He sees instead a deep history of white violence stretching back centuries, to the start of the slave trade, and forward through Jim Crow and the systematic impoverishment of black families. The violence of the inner city, in his reading, is not isolated but deeply connected to the society surrounding it, an inevitable result of deliberate policy choices.

Given this history, given that King's own pursuit of nonviolence was met with a bullet to the head, what should maybe mystify us more—more than gun-toting teenagers or even the occasional riot in the wake of a police killing—is the enduring culture of nonviolence. Could there be a more astonishing proof of the abiding power of King's dream than the immediate forgiveness voiced by many of the families of the worshippers gunned down this June in Charleston's Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church? Or of the dream's abiding promise, that a black president would summon from their sacrifice a note of national grace? And yet again, will any of that really make a difference in West Baltimore, or in New Orleans?

Mayor Landrieu is doing everything he can. Still, it is hard not to conclude that policy decisions already made in Louisiana, and across the United States, are conspiring against him. To me, Goldberg's reporting suggests that there is just one truly formidable social program for the lost souls of New Orleans—one costly initiative to buttress them with job skills and mentors, and deprive them of the arms and ammunition that society otherwise readily supplies. It is called Angola prison. How the United States came to make this fateful choice will be the subject of Coates's next essay, this fall. *A*

Cities

Since 1980, more than 260,000 black men have been killed in America—nearly five times more Americans than died in the Vietnam War. Mitch Landrieu, the mayor of New Orleans, is on a crusade to stop the killing and break the cycle of violence.

A Matter of Black Lives

By JEFFREY GOLDBERG

PHOTOGRAPHS BY WILLIAM WIDMER



In late April of 1994, a 9-year-old African American boy from the broken-down Central City neighborhood of New Orleans wrote a letter to President Bill Clinton, asking him to bring about an end to the violence that was devastating his city.

"Dear Mr. Clinton," James Darby began. "I want you to stop the killing in the city. People is dead and I think that somebody might kill me. So would you please stop the people from deading. I'm asking you nicely to stop it. I know you can do it. Do it. I now you could." He signed the letter, "Your friend, James."

Ten days later, on May 8, Mother's Day, Darby was visiting A. L. Davis Park with several members of his family. The park, named after Abraham Lincoln Davis, the first African American to sit on the New Orleans city council, is a compact rectangle of basketball courts and grass patches situated directly across the street from a public-housing complex.

Darby, his mother, Janice Payne, and her sister laid out a picnic for their family. Soon they were playing in an impromptu touch-football game with other families. At first, spirits were good, but the game became tense, and amiable mockery suddenly gave way to taunting. A fight erupted. One of the players, apparently associated with Darby's family, punched a 16-year-old girl named Karen Norfleet in the eye. Norfleet's 14-year-old brother, Michael, turned to members of Darby's family and, according to witnesses, said, "Wait here. You're going to get yours."

Michael and Karen Norfleet ran home to their apartment in a nearby housing project. They found their 19-year-old brother, Joseph, seated on a couch, drinking Bacardi. Joseph saw Karen's eye and became angry. He had just returned home from a shift on a lawn-maintenance crew. He was tired, somewhat drunk, a bit stoned, and in a foul mood. A short discussion about the merits of immediate retribution ensued. An older



^ Landrieu consoles a grieving woman at a prayer vigil, held during the Essence Festival in New Orleans for mothers who have lost their children to gun violence.

man in the house, a 32-year-old convicted felon named James Walker, the son of Norfleet's mother's boyfriend, urged Joseph to defend his sister's honor.

Joseph Norfleet admired Walker, and so rose to his challenge. He grabbed a shotgun from a closet, and the men drove with Michael to the park. They soon located the people involved in the football-game altercation. The car slowed. Someone inside the car is believed to have yelled, "Yo, bitches!" Joseph pointed the shotgun out the window and pulled the trigger. Joseph Norfleet had been shot twice in his life—the first time when he was 15, as a victim of a robbery, and then, at 17, during a drive-by shooting in his neighborhood—but he had never before fired a weapon.

Norfleet missed his intended target, a man associated with the Darby family. James Darby, who was eating potato chips when the Norfleets rolled up, was struck in the head. Two other people, including Darby's uncle, were wounded when they were struck by fragments of the boy's skull. Janice Payne laid

herself atop her son and told him that she loved him. The 9-year-old who had feared being killed lay dead on the street.

Darby was one of 424 people murdered in New Orleans in 1994. At the time, New Orleans had the highest murder rate of any city in the country.

The killing of a small child will generally provoke immense public and police attention—even when the murder takes place in an otherwise overlooked African American community—and Joseph Norfleet and his brother Michael were quickly arrested. Joseph was convicted of first-degree murder. His sentence was predetermined by Louisiana law: life without the possibility of parole. Louisiana's sentencing guidelines are among the most stringent in the country, and so Norfleet, who was then 19, understood that, barring a pardon from the governor—an improbability, given both the infrequency of such pardons and, especially, the age of his victim—he would spend the rest of his life as a resident of the country's largest maximum-security prison, the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola.



At the time of Darby's death, Mitch Landrieu was a Democratic state legislator who lived less than two miles from the park where Darby was shot. Perhaps because of Darby's age, or perhaps because of the utterly random quality of Darby's death, Landrieu, who is now serving his second term as the mayor of New Orleans, mentions his name with some regularity in speeches about crime and public order and the decimation by gunfire of his city's poor African American neighborhoods. Landrieu notes melancholically that, had Darby lived, he would be 30 years old today. "Maybe he'd be a doctor, maybe he'd be a lawyer," he says. But he adds that, given the straitened circumstances of Darby's youth, he might one day have found himself, as a young man in an unforgiving neighborhood, armed and ready to kill.

"It's a roll of the dice. People get out of Central City, they do," Landrieu told me recently. "But many don't. If life had gone differently for Joseph Norfleet and James Darby, who knows? Joseph Norfleet could have been that 9-year-old victim. Maybe Joseph Norfleet would be dead and James Darby would be in prison today. We see this so often—today's shooter is tomorrow's victim."

Landrieu and I were talking about the Darby murder while driving to Angola. The prison, 130 miles from New Orleans, could legitimately be considered the city's most distant neighborhood. Of the roughly 6,300 men currently imprisoned at Angola—three-quarters of them there for life, and nearly 80 percent of them African American—about 2,000 at any given moment are from New Orleans. Thousands of children in New Orleans—a city whose population today is roughly 380,000—have fathers who will reside until death in Angola.

"This place will bring you to your knees," Landrieu said.

Why?

"What you're going to see is a huge governing failure on the part of our society. This country has the highest incarceration rate in the world, and Louisiana has the highest incarceration rate in the country. That's failure."

Landrieu visits Angola on occasion to learn more about a crisis that has come to consume him. He decided, early in his first term, to devote the resources of his city to solving one of this country's most diabolical challenges—the persistence of homicide in poor African American communities. The numbers are staggering. From 1980 to 2013, 262,000 black males were killed in America. By contrast, roughly 58,000 Americans died in Vietnam. In New Orleans, about 6,000 African American men have been murdered since 1980. The killers of these men were, in the vast majority of cases, other African American men. In New Orleans, 80 percent of murder victims are believed to have known their killer.

After a three-year decline in the number of homicides in New Orleans, a recent spike in murders—matched by spikes in other cities, including Chicago and Baltimore—threatens to make 2015 a much more violent year in Landrieu's city than he would have imagined.

"We do not know why it's curving back up," he said. "We do know that the gang and group violence is down in areas where we're interrupting violence. But maybe this is like pressing one side of a balloon, I don't know. I do know that if we as a country took this seriously, we would treat this as a crisis and not stop until we fixed it."

Landrieu's preoccupation with the homicide plague afflicting black America is an unusual one, even among big-city mayors who face the same appalling challenge, especially because his city confronts a unique set of threats to its health, and even to its existence. When Landrieu was first elected mayor, in 2010, he inherited a city—from a mayor, Ray Nagin, who would soon be off to prison himself—that had been broken by a hurricane. "It looks like a lot of that place could be bulldozed," the then–speaker of the U.S. House

Thousands of children in New Orleans have fathers who will reside until death in Angola prison.



< Inside a cellblock at the Louisiana State Penitentiary, better known as Angola, the largest maximum-security prison in America. Some 2,000 men from New Orleans are imprisoned there, many of them for life.

of Representatives, Dennis Hastert, said of New Orleans in 2005, shortly after the levees gave way.

New Orleans did not disappear, of course, but neither did its troubles. As we drove to Angola, I asked Landrieu why he has made homicide—a seemingly ineradicable disease in a gun-saturated country whose popular culture glorifies violence—his chief priority.

"I didn't grab this. This problem grabbed me," he said. "I guess you could say I'm obsessed with it. I don't understand why it's okay in America—a country that's supposed to be the greatest country in the world, a place with more wealth than anywhere else—for us to leave so many of our citizens basically dead. Why do we allow our citizens to kill each other as if it's the cost of doing business? We have basically given up on our African American boys. I'd be a cold son of a bitch if I ignored it, if I just focused on the other side of town, or focused just on tourism.

"I'm absolutely certain we have the money and the capacity to solve this problem, but we do not have the will. This problem doesn't touch enough Americans to rise to the level of a national crisis. But these are all our children. I'm embarrassed by it. How could this be normal?"

Landrieu, who is 55, is bald and tank-like in build. His physical appearance would be intimidating, except that his face is open and nearly perfectly round. He is also pathologically gregarious, a retail politician of almost Bill Clinton–level dexterity, and he has a Clinton-like need to be heard, and to be liked. He is also prolix and self-winding: once he becomes fixed on a subject, the words come in torrents.

"This is absolutely not the state of nature," he said to me. "It's treated like it is, but this is a lie. We've got to figure out as a nation that the current state of affairs is not acceptable: schools that are not working, people who don't have jobs, and, consequently, young men killing each other because they don't see anything better for themselves."

Landrieu and a largely African American team of law-enforcement officials, sociologists, and government reformers have tried to solve this problem in diverse ways. Under the rubric of a program called NOLA for Life, they are experimenting with new and comprehensive methods of diverting young black men from the path of self-destruction.

The program includes mental-health and substance-abuse counseling, job training—52 percent of African American men in New Orleans are not working—and a package of efforts designed to break the cycle of retribution that often gets sparked when someone is shot. Teams of counselors, some of whom are ex–gang members, are deployed to the city's emergency rooms to prevent aggrieved relatives and friends of shooting victims from exacting revenge.

Other aspects of NOLA for Life include summer camps and a midnight basketball league of the sort that was widely mocked when President Clinton made it part of his 1994 crime bill. But the most innovative feature of Landrieu's effort might be the city's Group Violence Reduction Strategy, which is based on the work of David Kennedy, a criminologist at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, in New York City, who argues that the targeting of small but dense networks of gang members in specific geographic locations—men in the 16-to-24-year-old bracket who are the most likely to shoot and get shot—will yield disproportionate reductions in violence.

The centerpiece of this strategy is the "call-in," in which young men on the precipice—those who are acquainted with the criminal-justice system but have not yet been convicted of crimes that would earn them decades in Angola—are alternately cajoled and threatened into obeying the law. Highly stylized and minutely scripted, the call-ins take place in New Orleans now at least four times a year. The call-in is initiated when a group of 20 or so young men, either on parole or in temporary residence at the parish jail, are ordered to appear in a municipal courtroom on a certain morning, without being told why.

I attended a call-in one morning not long ago. Officers seated the young men who had been summoned on two sides of the high-ceilinged courtroom. Twelve men in orange jumpsuits, prisoners brought to court from the parish jail, sat on one side, and 11 men, free but on probation, sat on the other, facing each other. Several of the young men had arranged their faces to reflect boredom and disdain, but I noticed at least a few flashes of surprised recognition when Landrieu marched into the courtroom. He was followed by a long, solemn column of prosecutors, law-enforcement officials, social workers, clergy, and physicians. The phalanx split in two—the representatives of law enforcement sat on the left side of the gallery, facing the presiding judge; physicians, counselors, and community leaders sat on the right.

The mayor slowly approached the podium, facing the judge, and began speaking in a preacher's cadence.

"My name is Mitch Landrieu," he began. "I'm the mayor. We asked all of you to come today because we want to talk to you. We came here with a clear and simple message. The killing on the streets of New Orleans has to stop. There's still too much shooting. There's too much death, too much devastation. It's tearing us apart as a community, and it's happening and you're participating in it. We came here today as a community to tell you that it's got to stop. It's got to end.

"We would not be here today, you would not be here today, if we did not care about you. I'm tired of getting a phone call in the middle of the night from the police chief saying, 'Mr. Mayor, I'm sorry to inform you that we got a message that shots rang out, we arrived on the scene, we found a young African American man on the pavement, blood running out of his head, dead on arrival. No witnesses.' This city can't survive—we can't survive—unless we get the shooting to stop. I brought some folks with me, and I'm going to ask them to talk to you and tell you who they are and what they want."

Landrieu paused, looking over his left shoulder. "On this side of the room, you're going to see the police chief, the district attorney, the sheriff. You're going to see the United States attorney sitting behind them. You're going to see the representatives of every federal law-enforcement agency in America—the U.S. Marshals, the FBI, you're going to see the DEA, you're going to see the ATF. They came to be with you today. To talk to you.

"We want you to talk to your friends in your groups, and

you can tell them the rules of engagement are changing on the streets of New Orleans. If you walk out of here and commit a crime, if you walk out of here and do something that is going to hurt someone, everybody on this side of the room is going to find you and stop you, because you haven't stopped yourself. We have to do that to protect you and protect the people of New Orleans."

He then pointed to his right. "On this side of the room, you're going to see folks who can help you, on jobs, on substance abuse. If you choose well, I'll make a commitment to you that you're going to go to the front of the line: if you need a job, if you need mental-health, substance-abuse counseling, if you say you need something, the folks on this side of the room will listen to you, talk to you, help you.

"So if there's a bad decision, there will be a bad consequence. A good decision, a good consequence."

For more than an hour, two dozen speakers addressed the men. Most, including the highest-ranking law-enforcement officials, were African American, and some of these officials said explicitly what their presence signified—Angola did not have to be the inevitable, final stop for the prisoners and parolees. The young men sat in total silence. As the police chief, Michael Harrison, addressed them, surveillance photos of several members of his captive audience flashed on screens in the courtroom. The message from Harrison: "We know what you're doing." The U.S. attorney, Ken Polite, who was raised in public housing in New Orleans and whose half brother was killed in gang-related violence, warned the young men that his prosecutors were using powerful federal laws to dismantle entire gangs—and that those convicted could find themselves in prisons further afield than Angola. "You could end up in Minneapolis," he said, in a tone suggesting that Minnesota was in another galaxy.

The last speaker finished, and the prisoners were removed from the courtroom. The young men on probation were told that they were free to go if they wished, but that they were invited to meet with social workers and counselors in a nearby room. Many chose to stay. Landrieu and other officials followed them in. I overheard the mayor speaking quietly to one man: "We're here for you. We love you. We want you to change the circumstances of your life."

I spoke with one participant, who said he had a drug-distribution charge but was "out of the game right now." Only right now?, I asked. "If I need money, I'll be back. No choice." I asked him whether he would take advantage of what the mayor was offering. "I'll go for job training, definitely." Do you think the city cares about you? "Maybe," he said warily, as if I were asking a trick question. "Maybe so."

As we left the courthouse, Landrieu said, "We have to save these boys. They're our children."

LANDRIEU IS THE FIRST white person to serve as mayor of New Orleans since his father, Moon Landrieu, completed his second term, in 1978. Moon, beloved by African Americans for battling segregation, still lives in the majority-black, frayed-at-the-edges neighborhood where he and his wife, Verna, raised their nine children. The Landrieu family, driven by Catholic social teachings, tied their fate to that of their African American neighbors in a manner uncommon in the South, or elsewhere in America, for that matter. They embraced desegregation and civil rights as their white friends fled for the suburbs. Moon told me that for a time in the 1960s, he lost most of his white friends. "The whites were upset that I was standing for integration," he said. "It got so that I decided I liked black people more than I liked white people. Now I just accept people as individuals, but you have to understand the atmosphere at the time."

The Landrieus also tied their electoral fate to the African American community. Moon Landrieu received 90 percent of the African American vote in his first run for mayor, in 1970, and his oldest daughter, Mary, represented Louisiana in the U.S. Senate for three terms thanks mainly to the support of African Americans. (She lost her reelection attempt last year after receiving less than 20 percent of the white vote.) In his most recent race for reelection, Mitch Landrieu, running against two black candidates, received the majority of black votes.

The thick bond between the Landrieu family and the African American community of New Orleans may help explain why Mitch Landrieu has made the protection of black youth his top priority. It also may help explain why Landrieu is comfortable discussing the crisis of African American homicide in a manner that sometimes causes offense among both blacks and whites. He supplements his arguments about the importance of jobs and education with a critique of what he sees as the quick-trigger culture prevalent in some impoverished African American communities. And he argues against what he sees as a bienpensant double standard in mainstream liberal thought: black lives don't matter only when they're taken by police officers, he argues—they matter when they're taken by other blacks, too.

Black lives don't matter only when they're taken by police, Landrieu argues. They matter when they're taken by other blacks, too.

"This particular problem has to do with a lot of things," Landrieu said to me as we drove to Angola. "Poor personal responsibility, family structures, a particular culture."

Channeling the arguments I've heard made by several African American intellectuals (including my *Atlantic* colleague Ta-Nehisi Coates), I posited that character is hard to perfect when you've got no money and no prospects: "This isn't about pulling up your saggy pants. This is about ending housing segregation and ensuring equal access to services."

"It's about both," the mayor said. "Many people need some help, and many people can pull themselves up. But here's the thing. We can talk about slavery, we can talk about reparations, we can talk about the need for the nation to atone for its original sin. We in New Orleans have that obligation more than anyone because we sold more people into slavery than any other city. But reparations are not coming. So it's almost an academic argument. Maybe we should give them, right? But I've got a certain amount of time in office to do what I need to do, and I'm going to spend my time fighting for something that has a possibility of happening."

Though Landrieu tries to avoid using the term *black-on-black crime*—an expression that has fallen from favor for several



^ Today Angola is, in a fashion, still a working plantation, where the mainly African American inmates grow cotton and other crops under the supervision of shotgun-carrying guards on horseback. Here, prisoners stack hay bales onto a flatbed truck, July 14, 2015.

sound reasons, not least of which is its popularity among people who would never think to describe violence committed by biker gangs as "white-on-white crime"—he does not hesitate to argue, particularly in front of black audiences, that black males are in the grip of a culture of violent retribution.

"Culture is a pattern of behavior that has been developed over time that makes it seem rational for kids who know each other to kill each other," he told me. "People get freaked out when I talk about it. In my opinion, people don't know what culture means. They think I'm saying it's hereditary, that this is the way things are supposed to be. Culture is learned over time: the way you cook, the way you play music, whatever. If you can learn one thing, then you can learn a different way. You can change it."

It is politically (and intellectually) risky to attribute the weaknesses of a historically besieged group to the shortcomings of its culture. In the years after Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who was an assistant secretary in the Labor Department, released his seminal report on the fragile state of black families in 1965, many conservatives came to argue that what would save African Americans was not government programs but rather the development of a culture of self-sufficiency and self-improvement. Some liberals, in contrast, came to believe that the near-exclusive conservative focus on bootstrapping (something also emphasized periodically by prominent African Americans, including President Obama and—now notoriously—Bill Cosby) was a way to absolve the country's white majority of responsibility for the conditions that led to hardship in the first place. "Landrieu is a liberal making a conservative argument that was once a liberal argument—he's trying to reappropriate it," says Daryl Scott, a professor of African American history at Howard University. "He's arguing for structural reforms and personal reforms all at the same time."

Landrieu's closest ally among American mayors is Philadelphia's Michael Nutter, who is, if anything, far blunter on the subject of African American street culture than Landrieu. He argues that violence gives elected officials little choice but to confront it in a frank manner.

"No one really likes talking about race and violence, regardless of their ethnicity. I get criticized in Philadelphia from time to time for talking about black-on-black violence, and I'm African American," Nutter told me when I spoke with him recently. "It's going to be tougher for a white elected official to talk about it, especially in a majority–African American city, but the bottom line is—and I say this to all mayors—when young people are dying in the streets, you've got to take a forceful stand against the violence, or you're going to be criticized for not fighting it and not caring about young African Americans."

Landrieu told me he understands that he would be on safer ground if he limited his analysis to, say, the impact of discriminatory housing policies born out of white-supremacist ideology. "You know what? The culture developed out of a particular

history. But I can't reverse history. I can work on the problem right in front of me. So what I'm saying is, if I knock you off a chair, that's on me. If you're still on the ground a week later, that's on you."

What preoccupies Landrieu is the moment of decision—the moment when rage, or peer pressure, or humiliation, or the cold logic of preemption—brings a young man, gun in hand, to pull the trigger. Landrieu says he favors "responsible" gun-control measures, but he seems uninterested in discussing such issues, in part, perhaps, because he may one day run for governor. "I don't like spending a lot of time fighting fights that can't be won, and in Louisiana this can't be won," he told me. Though his friend Michael Nutter is acerbic on the role of guns in violence ("It is really, really hard to shoot people when you don't have a gun," he says), Landrieu argued in favor of another sort of gun control—"the kind of control a parent has over a child." He continued, "There's nothing that stops people in the community from trying to stop those guns from being used. If your kids showed up with a gun in your house, what would you do?"





^ *Top:* Mitch Landrieu with his father, Moon Landrieu, December 6, 2014. *Bottom:* Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter listens to Landrieu talk about reducing urban crime, September 26, 2013.

In a state where gun control is a lost cause, and in a city where the price of an illegal handgun can be less than the price of a tank of gas, the mayor wants to—and needs to—keep the focus on the men who hold the guns.

THE ANGOLA PENITENTIARY sits on 18,000 acres surrounded on three sides by the Mississippi River. Most of the prison consists of cultivated fields, lakes, and woods. High fences ring the cellblocks and dormitories (the death-row complex, which currently houses 82 men, is nearly hermetically sealed), but in any case, the river, and the Tunica Hills to the east, serve to thwart easy escape.

The prison was created from the remnants of three plantations, including one called Angola—named, it is believed, for the southern-African homeland of many of its slaves.

Today Angola is, in a fashion, still a working plantation; the prisoners do the farming under the supervision of shotgun-carrying guards on horseback. These prisoners grow food for all of Louisiana's prisons—Angola is also known as "The Farm"—and they raise cattle to be sold on the open market. The profits help defray the cost of running Angola, as does the gate revenue from the annual prisoner rodeos, which draw tens of thousands of spectators. The prison also grows cotton. Long lines of mainly African American inmates toil in the cotton fields where slaves once worked.

"This isn't something people from the North can ever believe," Landrieu said as we drove up.

An escort met us at the front gate, and we followed him down narrow roads, past "freemen" housing—*freemen* is an Angola term for guards—past lakes stocked with crappie, and past the Prison View golf course, maintained by prisoners and open to the public (convicted felons excepted) for a $10 greens fee. We arrived at Angola's "ranch house," a low-slung building containing guest rooms and a kitchen. Peacocks, pets of the warden, scattered as we pulled up.

There is nothing in this corner of Louisiana but prison; the nearest town is 22 miles away, and so Burl Cain, the warden, decided early in his tenure to be hospitable to visitors. When we arrived, a delegation of Ugandan prison officials, there to learn about the benefits of what Cain calls "moral rehabilitation," were seated at the dining-room table, silently eating fried catfish and corn bread. Convicted murderers do the cooking at the ranch house.

Cain is short and round, with snow-white hair and a drawl like syrup. He has ruled Angola since 1995 with something close to absolute power. A legend in Louisiana, and in national evangelical circles, he has transformed the prison, once one of the most dangerous in the country, into a semi-pacific hive of Christian fervor. (In 1992, there were 1,346 assaults—inmate-on-inmate and inmate-on-staff—at Angola; last year there were 343. No one has been murdered at Angola since 2004.)

He is an acutely religious person who asked me, shortly after we met, "Are you a God-fearing man?" Though Cain is a Republican, he and Landrieu get along well, in part because of a shared sense that something has gone awry in the way the country punishes criminals. "Don't be fooled by the good-ol'-boy thing," Landrieu instructed me when we arrived. "The warden has some very progressive ideas."

Cain did not disappoint. In conversation, he is less Boss Hogg and more heterodox criminologist, a practitioner who has come to believe that society is only too happy to forsake a whole class of men as irredeemable. "Look, I wouldn't let any of our sexual offenders out of here," he said over lunch. "That's too dangerous. But most of the murderers, they've hit criminal menopause. Once they hit 40, 50 years old, a lot of these guys, they're never going to hurt another person as long as they live. I would let some of them sleep in my house. I would return them to their communities if I could. But I can't. I'm not allowed to, even if the families of their victims no longer objected."

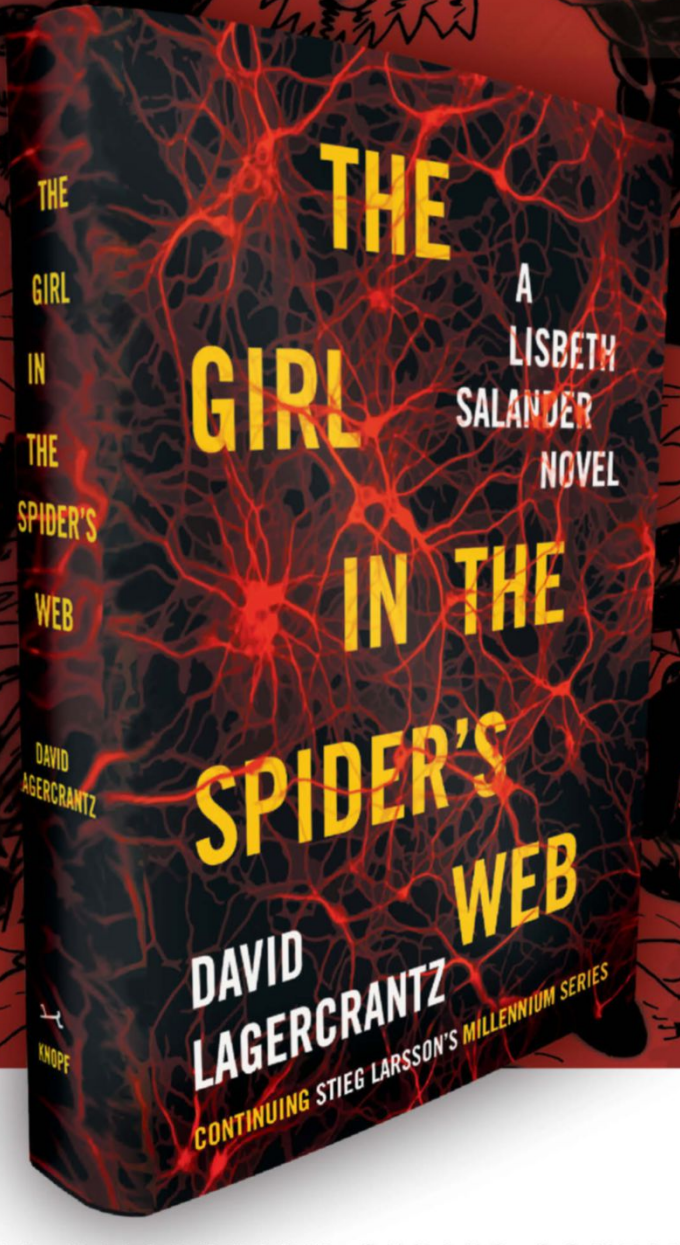
Hundreds of men serving life sentences have been trained as "peer ministers" at a Southern Baptist–run seminary on the prison grounds, and these men—"morally rehabilitated men," in Cain's description—are of great use in the cellblocks, cafeterias, and dormitories of Angola. "These are the guys who said I should stop using profanity," he said, "and you know what? They were right. When I banned profanity in the prison, we became less oppressive." He went on, "You know what's crazy? I got more than 400 people in vocational programs here, with the peer ministers providing teaching and moral support. I got people training as auto mechanics, in horticulture. This is a bigger vocational school than what we have on the outside. Why do we as a society wait until a guy ends up here before we give him a decent vocational education?"

Prison ministers serve as role models for young prisoners, in particular those serving sentences shorter than life, and who

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grew up without the benefit of a father. "They'd be of more use to society out on the streets of New Orleans and Baton Rouge," Cain said. "Can you imagine the impact some of these ministers would have with the young people? If these peer ministers were out in their communities, they could work with kids so we never have to see them here." But as the law stands now, most of these men will die in prison. "Charles Manson in California gets a parole hearing," Cain said. "In Louisiana, all you can get is a pardon hearing, and governors aren't comfortable signing pardons."

Cain led us to the main prison complex, to an area populated mainly by "trustees," prisoners who have earned, often through decades of compliant behavior, the ability to move more freely through the yard. (Prisoners who have not chosen "moral rehabilitation" are housed in more traditionally punitive ways.) Cain's manner was easy with the large trustee population. He walked through all areas of the prison without protection. Inmates beseeched him with requests; he made note of each one. "Boss man," one prisoner called out, "I want to get back into the Bible college."

"Why did you leave?," Cain asked.

The prisoner whispered his answer in Cain's ear.

"All right, let me see what's happening," Cain said.

In another part of the yard, Landrieu was shaking hands like it was a Mardi Gras parade. "What are y'all in for?," Landrieu asked a group of convicts.

"Murder."

"Murder."

"Murder."

"If I could just understand why these guys did what they did ... ," Landrieu said to me, trailing off.

"Hey, Mayor," a prisoner called out. He was about 6 foot 5 with a diamond-encrusted gold grill gleaming from his mouth and a cross tattooed in the space between his eyes. This turned out to be Corey Miller, better known outside Angola as C-Murder, the rapper whose brother is Master P, the hip-hop impresario. C-Murder is in Angola for murder. "I'm trying to get a new trial," he told Landrieu.

We worked our way to the central yard's Catholic chapel—the "nondenominational Catholic chapel," said Cain, who is wary of Church-state separationists. Last year, at Landrieu's request, Cain had assembled a panel of inmates, each of them a New Orleanian, to talk with Landrieu about their lives, crimes, and regrets. Now Cain had gathered the men again in this chapel, so that Landrieu could test his ideas about reducing New Orleans's murder rate against their bitter experience.

The men who constitute Landrieu's dialogue group were waiting inside. They smiled when the mayor entered, and he greeted each one personally. They were a diverse assortment of killers. James Camper executed a neighbor; Jackie Green murdered his ex-wife and a man with whom she was keeping company; Dennis Hugle killed his business partner; Burtell Thomas killed a man he thought had threatened his girlfriend; Marion Taylor shot a friend to death in an argument; Ausbia Taylor shot a man in what was believed to be a drug-related altercation; Christopher Collins murdered a man in an attempted robbery; Alvin Williams shot a man he thought owed him money from a drug deal.

Over the next hour, Landrieu moderated a discussion about the causes and effects of violence; about personal responsibility and society's shortcomings; and about how, in certain neighborhoods, shooting is sometimes not a manifestation of wickedness or psychosis but a necessity for physical self-preservation. This is an argument Landrieu has found fascinating. He told me earlier, "In the context of the culture of certain neighborhoods, it's kill or be killed. That's the cycle that has to be broken."

"I got a sad story to start off with," Landrieu said to the assembled murderers. "I went to the juvenile-justice center once in the city, and there was this one kid who wouldn't meet me. We went into the gym. I said, 'Come on, how many times does the mayor come visit you?' So he talked about how many times he'd been arrested—16. 'And you're 16 years old,' I said. 'You understand the next time you hurt somebody, you're going to spend the rest of your life in Angola?' Well, he got out. A judge let him out. And he killed a pizza-delivery guy. You all are going to see him up here. I want somebody to mentor him. The reason I came here last time, I'm trying to understand why everybody is doing what they're doing, to get into the heads of the young people who are shooting and being shot."

"We see this so often," Landrieu says. "Today's shooter is tomorrow's victim."

The inmate seated next to me, Ausbia Taylor, said quietly, "He'll change when he gets here."

"So let's pick up where we left off," Landrieu said. "What don't I understand? Tell me. What don't I see?"

"The things we care about are different. At least I know that's for me," Burtell Thomas said. "If I had known then what I know now ..."

Landrieu asked: "What do you know now?"



< Burl Cain, Angola's warden, in a prison chapel. "Most of the murderers, they've hit criminal menopause," he says. "I would return them to their communities if I could."

"I know that you have to pick and choose. The most precious things can be lost or taken from you very easily. I know now that what you call being a man is not necessarily being a man."

"What does that mean, to be a man?"

Dennis Hugle answered: "Being a man is doing the one thing you really don't want to do."

"What made you guys shoot people?," Landrieu asked. "Are you afraid for your life? Did you feel disrespected? It used to be that you got into a fight, you hoped someone would break it up. But now it's about shooting, and mostly about shooting them in the head."

"It's too hard to walk away," said Alvin Williams. "You know what you're up against. You don't think about what you're doing, you don't think about this place, you just come to make a decision quickly. It's just the circumstance that you find yourself in at the moment."

"Why can't you walk away?," Landrieu asked. "Why can't you just walk away?"

"You really can't understand," Thomas said.

"If you walk away, you're going to walk away with holes," Christopher Collins said.

"So you're talking about self-defense."

"If you tell me you're going to kill me, I have to kill you first because I have to take you at your word," Collins said. "I don't want to die."

"Shooting the guy in the legs is not going to do it, Mayor," Thomas said. "Person that gets shot in the legs, he can still find a phone and call his partners."

"You can't get caught slipping, as we say," James Camper, who killed his neighbor, said. "I'm sitting on my porch with my family and here comes my past coming back to haunt me. Here comes my past with a gun."

"Shoot or be shot. When did this start? Was it that way when y'all grew up?"

"We see it happen," Alvin Williams said. "That's what you learn."

"Was it always that way?"

"I'm 63 now," Camper, the oldest of the prisoners, said. "It wasn't like that in the '70s. Right around the '80s, it changed."

"Do you guys know anybody who didn't have a gun?"

"Everybody had a gun," Thomas said. "It's cheaper to buy a gun than to buy books."

"There's a big fight in the country," Landrieu said to the prisoners, perhaps mindful of my questions to him about gun control. "Is it the guns? Should we seize all the guns from everybody? That's what people say."

"It's not a gun problem," Thomas said. "We've got a communication problem. If I can't talk to you without feeling played, I've got to go for the gun."

"What if you don't have a gun?," I asked.

"People will find some way to kill people they don't like," Thomas said.

The mayor moved on. "Answer this as truthfully as you can: Do you guys feel like you're here because you're bad? Or do you feel forsaken? Did someone else contribute to what you did?"

"I did everything with my own hand," said Jackie Green, the man who killed his ex-wife and her alleged lover. "I left my own children behind. I did this to myself."

"You think society cares about you?"

"Society is afraid of us," Williams said.

"What could I have done if I were mayor when you guys did what you did? What could I have done to grab you guys before you got where you got?"

"Get kids out of the neighborhoods," Burtell Thomas said. "You got to expose them to different things. Learn new things. Get them somewhere where they can find a role model."

"Do you think the young guys coming up now are more dangerous?"

Unanimous agreement: "Yeah."

"They're colder," said one inmate.

"But they can't take ass whuppings anymore," Camper said. "They can't fight. It's too easy to get guns, and nobody knows how to fight."

"Hey, if I beat you severely in front of people, you're going to come back and shoot me," Landrieu said.

"Let's be real," Thomas said. "A lot of people who have missing moms, missing dads, they make it. I can't blame the dysfunctional family. I read stories about dudes who made it."

"It's about critical decision making," Alvin Williams added. "I think we need more critical-thinking classes. We should have them in the community centers. One decision you make is going to change your whole life. We all know that."

"You've got to find them something they're interested in," Jackie Green said. "Certain things grab your interest. We all have negativity, but I started learning in prison. I got a new attitude. I started writing. I started arts and crafts. I started law. I'm going to read law for the rest of my life. I enjoy doing it."

Landrieu, who is a lawyer, laughed. "That's a lie," he said.

"I get high on it."

"You don't get a headache from it?"

The prisoners began to talk about their various arts-and-crafts projects.

"It's a prison, so it's safe here, in a strange kind of way," Thomas said.

AFTER AN HOUR, Landrieu and I walked outside onto a bright concrete walkway. A deputy warden approached. "Here's the inmate you were asking for," he told Landrieu. The mayor shook hands with Joseph Norfleet, the man who killed young James Darby in 1994.

Norfleet is stocky, with a thin beard, a full face, and mournful eyes. He was wearing jeans and a white T-shirt. He didn't seem particularly surprised to see the mayor of New Orleans in Angola.

"I talk about you all the time when I'm giving speeches, you know that?," Landrieu said.

"I appreciate that," Norfleet said quietly.

They made small talk about the old neighborhood, and then Landrieu asked, "Can you recount what happened that day?"

"Well, I came home from work, had a little bit to drink, smoked a little weed. I was already feeling bad because the days weren't going well. I was on lawn maintenance. Dealing with



^ "I wish I could go back and do something different, because I know I wouldn't be here and James wouldn't be dead." Joseph Norfleet, who shot and killed a 9-year-old boy in 1994, has spent the past two decades in Angola prison, where he is serving a life sentence.

the hot sun. So my little sister and my brother come in, they told me they were up at A. L. Davis playground and they got into this fight with another family. There were two adults there that should have broken up the fight, but they got involved in it. One of the guys that was supposed to be an adult, he hit my sister."

"You got mad?"

"I was raised up so as to not abuse women. I just couldn't seem to let that go."

"Someone was in the house with you?," Landrieu asked.

"James is the guy that drove the car," Norfleet answered, referring to James Walker, the son of his mother's boyfriend, who was in the house.

"I had a temper on me, and [Walker's] exact words were 'Get the gun.' I grabbed it and we jumped in the car. We took my brother Michael with us."

"He was 14 at the time?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why did you bring Michael?"

"Michael saw what had happened. I didn't know the people I was supposed to shoot."

"And then what?"

"I fired the gun. I was pointing it at the guy, that's the only person I really saw. I didn't know I hit James [Darby] until I heard it on the radio the next morning. That's the first time I shot a gun."

"You killed a 9-year-old," Landrieu said.

"Truthfully, when I found out, man, personally, I knew it was messed up. I was making plans to turn myself in when I got caught."

"How did you make the decision to get in that car with a shotgun?"

"I play that back in my mind."

"I bet you play it back often."

"I wish I could go back and do something different, because I know I wouldn't be here and James wouldn't be dead."

"I just—" Landrieu sputtered. "Why did you get in the car?"

"Anger. Anger actually blinds you. That's what I found out that day. I've lived with this every day."

"You got Michael arrested. He spent some time in juvenile."

"I pulled the trigger. This was my burden. I told Michael, 'Do whatever you have to do, say whatever you have to say. Make a deal.' He didn't deserve to be in jail."

I asked Norfleet a question: "Could you have walked away from that situation and survived?"

"Yes. I know that now. I didn't know that back then. I was filled with anger over what they did to my sister. I did what I thought I had to do at the time. I wish I didn't do it now."

"What's this place been like for you?," Landrieu asked.

"First 10 years was rough," Norfleet said. "Basically, I was trying not to be somebody's bitch for 10 years. Facing guys wanting to murder me. Facing guys who thought my time should be hard. That's penitentiary life. They know I killed a kid. They did everything they could to degrade you ... But I came here a man, I'll die a man, that's for sure. Over time, I wouldn't say it got easier, but as people get to know you for who you are, you know ..."

Does your family visit?

"Not too often. I'm kind of just out here, you know?"

The mayor told Norfleet he hoped to talk with him again. "I can learn something from you," he said. After Landrieu left, Norfleet took a photograph from his pocket and showed it to me. "I make tables in arts and crafts. This is one of my tables."

A few weeks later, I went back to Angola, where I met a young New Orleanian man serving a life sentence for first-degree murder. He had been in a gang, and he had done all the things that gang members do. His body was a canvas of threatening tattoos, and he was dour and forbidding in affect. I asked him where in Angola he worked. On the farm, he said, but added, "A lot of the time I'm doing arts and crafts." What do you make at arts and crafts?, I asked. His face lit up. "Wait here," he said. He left for a moment, and came back with a large shopping bag filled with pink and magenta hair bows. "I make these. Girls' hair bows," he said.

"You make hair bows?"

Yes, he confirmed, and he added that he sells them at the arts-and-crafts festival that Burl Cain runs outside the prison rodeo each fall. "I made $1,900 last rodeo," he said. The young prisoner got to keep a large portion of the proceeds.

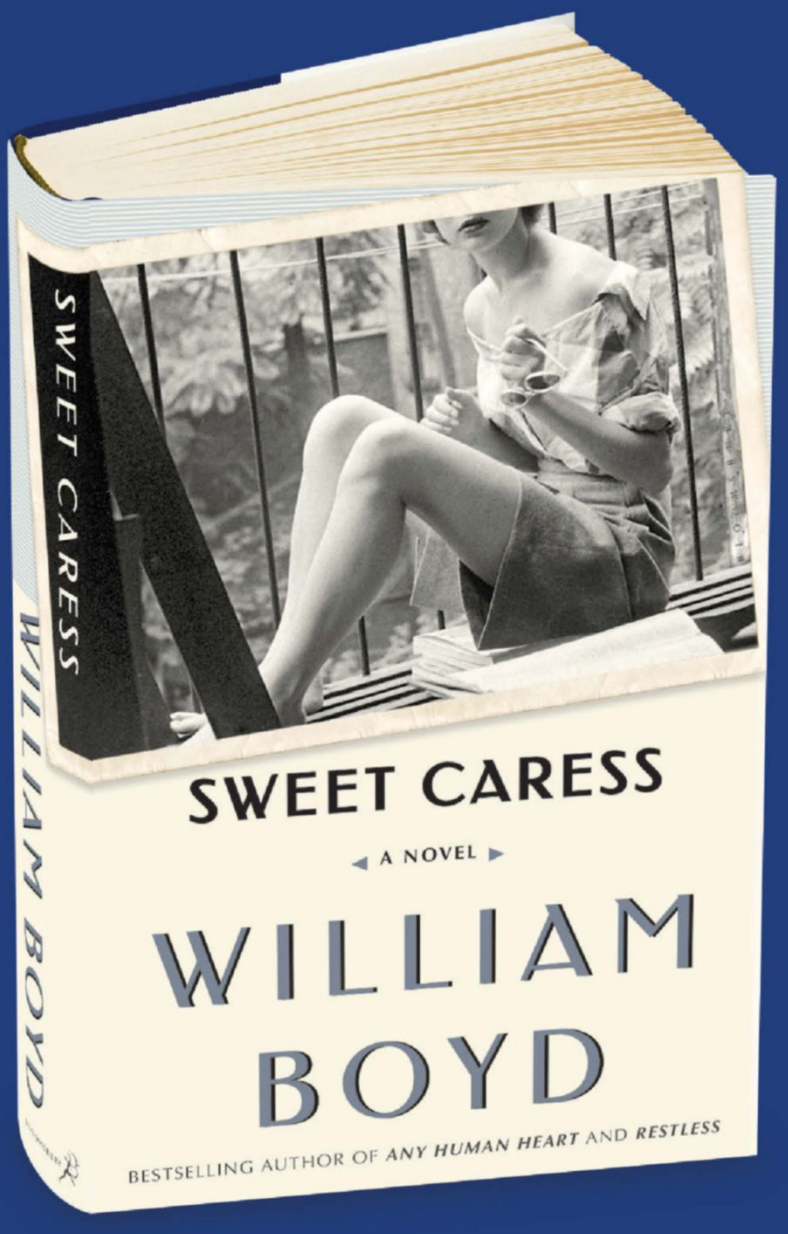
An obvious thought soon occurred to me: What if our society ensured that a creative and entrepreneurial young man could discover his talents, and be shepherded toward success, before he killed someone, rather than after? What if our society designed a gun-free haven for education, job training, and moral instruction that wasn't also a maximum-security prison costing taxpayers more than $30,000 a year per inmate?

"What a waste," Landrieu said to me after our visit with Norfleet. "Every time a person is killed on the streets, we lose two lives. I understand he killed a kid and he deserves to spend the rest of his life suffering the consequences. But think of what it could have been for him if he didn't pull the trigger. Think about what it could have been for us." A

Jeffrey Goldberg is a national correspondent for The Atlantic.

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LET TO MY SON

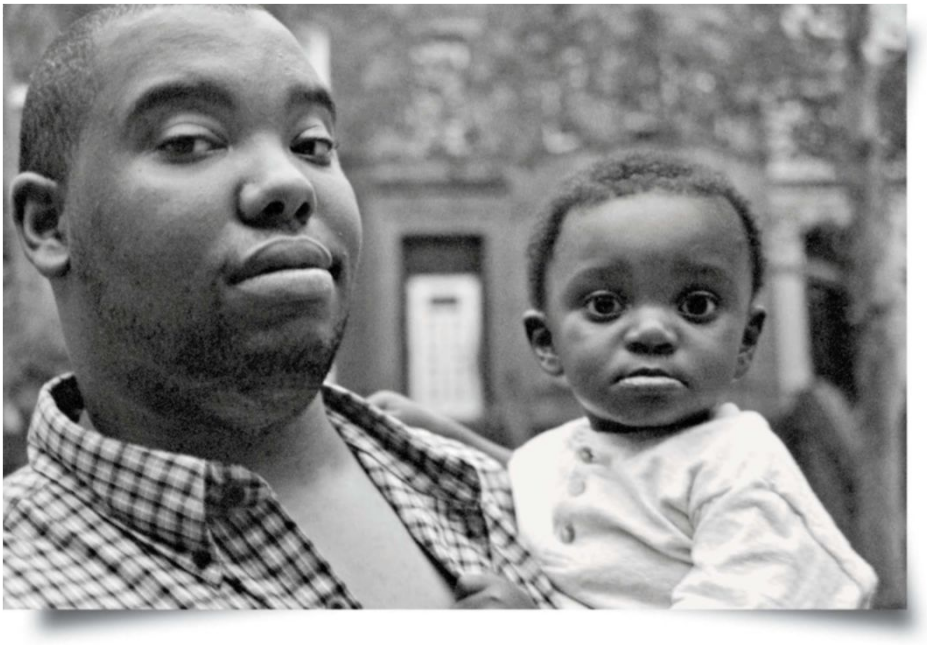
BY TA-NEHISI COATES

And have brought humanity to the edge of oblivion: because they think they are white.
— James Baldwin

Son,

Last Sunday the host of a popular news show asked me what it meant to lose my body. The host was broadcasting from Washington, D.C., and I was seated in a remote studio on the Far West Side of Manhattan. A satellite closed

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The author and his son, Samori, in 2001

the miles between us, but no machinery could close the gap between her world and the world for which I had been summoned to speak. When the host asked me about my body, her face faded from the screen, and was replaced by a scroll of words, written by me earlier that week.

The host read these words for the audience, and when she finished she turned to the subject of my body, although she did not mention it specifically. But by now I am accustomed to intelligent people asking about the condition of my body without realizing the nature of their request. Specifically, the host wished to know why I felt that white America's progress, or rather the progress of those Americans who believe that they are white, was built on looting and violence. Hearing this, I felt an old and indistinct sadness well up in me. The answer to this question is the record of the believers themselves. The answer is American history.

There is nothing extreme in this statement. Americans deify democracy in a way that allows for a dim awareness that they have, from time to time, stood in defiance of their God. This defiance is not to be much dwelled upon. Democracy is a forgiving God and America's heresies—torture, theft, enslavement—are specimens of sin so common among individuals and nations that none can declare themselves immune. In fact, Americans, in a real sense, have never betrayed

their God. When Abraham Lincoln declared, in 1863, that the battle of Gettysburg must ensure "that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth," he was not merely being aspirational. At the onset of the Civil War, the United States of America had one of the highest rates of suffrage in the world. The question is not whether Lincoln truly meant "government of the people" but what our country has, throughout its history, taken the political term *people* to actually mean. In 1863 it did not mean your mother or your grandmother, and it did not mean you and me. As for now, it must be said that the elevation of the belief in being white was not achieved through wine tastings and ice-cream socials, but rather through the pillaging of life, liberty, labor, and land.

That Sunday, on that news show, I tried to explain this as best I could within the time allotted. But at the end of the segment, the host flashed a widely shared picture of a 12-year-old black boy tearfully hugging a white police officer, and she asked me what this photo said to me. And I knew then that I had failed. And I remembered that I had expected to fail. And I wondered again at the indistinct sadness welling up in me. Why exactly was I sad? I came out of the studio and walked for a while. It was a calm late-November day. Families, believing themselves white, were out on the streets. Infants, raised to be white, were bundled in strollers. And I was sad for these people, much as I was sad for the host and sad for all the people out there watching and reveling in a specious hope. I realized then why I was sad. When the journalist asked me about my body, it was like she was asking me to awaken her from the most gorgeous dream. I have seen that dream all my life. It is perfect houses with nice lawns. It is Memorial Day cookouts, block associations, and driveways. The Dream is tree houses and the Cub Scouts. And for so long I have wanted to escape into the Dream, to fold my country over my head like a blanket. But this has never been an option, because the Dream rests on our backs, the bedding made from our bodies. And knowing this, knowing that the Dream persists by warring with the known world, I was sad for the host, I was sad for all those families, I was sad for my country, but above all, in that moment, I was sad for you.

That was the week you learned that the killers of Michael Brown would go free. The men who had left his body in the street would never be punished. It was not my expectation that anyone would ever be punished. But you were young and still believed. You stayed up that night, waiting for the announcement of an indictment, and when instead it was announced that there was none, you said, "I've got to go," and you went into your room, and I heard you crying. I came in five minutes after, and I didn't hug you, and I didn't comfort you, because I thought it would be wrong to comfort you. I did not tell you that it would be okay, because I have never believed it would be okay. What I told you is what your grandparents tried to tell me: that this is your country, that this is your world, that this is your body, and you must find some way to live within the all of it.

I write you in your 15th year. I am writing you because this was the year you saw Eric Garner choked to death for selling cigarettes; because you know now that Renisha McBride was shot for seeking help, that John Crawford was shot down for browsing in a department store. And you have seen men in uniform drive by and murder Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old child whom they were oath-bound to protect. And you know now, if you did not before, that the police departments of your country have been endowed with the authority to destroy your body. It does not matter if the destruction is the result of an unfortunate overreaction. It does not matter if it originates in a misunderstanding. It does not matter if the destruction springs from a foolish policy. Sell cigarettes without the proper authority and your body can be destroyed. Turn into a dark stairwell and your body can be destroyed. The destroyers will rarely be held accountable. Mostly they will receive pensions.

RACISM DISLODGES BRAINS, BLOCKS AIRWAYS, EXTRACTS ORGANS, CRACKS BONES, BREAKS TEETH. YOU MUST NEVER LOOK AWAY FROM THIS.

There is nothing uniquely evil in these destroyers or even in this moment. The destroyers are merely men enforcing the whims of our country, correctly interpreting its heritage and legacy. This legacy aspires to the shackling of black bodies. It is hard to face this. But all our phrasing—*race relations*, *racial chasm*, *racial justice*, *racial profiling*, *white privilege*, even *white supremacy*—serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth. You must never look away from this. You must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body. And should one live in such a body? What should be our aim beyond meager survival of constant, generational, ongoing battery and assault? I have asked this question all my life. I have sought the answer through my reading and writings, through the music of my youth, through arguments with your grandfather, with your mother. I have searched for answers in nationalist myth, in classrooms, out on the streets, and on other continents. The question is unanswerable, which is not to say futile. The greatest reward of this constant interrogation, of

confrontation with the brutality of my country, is that it has freed me from ghosts and myths.

AND YET I AM STILL AFRAID. I feel the fear most acutely whenever you leave me. But I was afraid long before you, and in this I was unoriginal. When I was your age the only people I knew were black, and all of them were powerfully, adamantly, dangerously afraid. It was always right in front of me. The fear was there in the extravagant boys of my West Baltimore neighborhood, in their large rings and medallions, their big puffy coats and full-length fur-collared leathers, which was their armor against their world. They would stand on the corner of Gwynn Oak and Liberty, or Cold Spring and Park Heights, or outside Mondawmin Mall, with their hands dipped in Russell sweats. I think back on those boys now and all I see is fear, and all I see is them girding themselves against the ghosts of the bad old days when the Mississippi mob gathered 'round their grandfathers so that the branches of the black body might be torched, then cut away. The fear lived on in their practiced bop, their slouching denim, their big T-shirts, the calculated angle of their baseball caps, a catalog of behaviors and garments enlisted to inspire the belief that these boys were in firm possession of everything they desired.

I felt the fear in the visits to my Nana's home in Philadelphia. You never knew her. I barely knew her, but what I remember is her hard manner, her rough voice. And I knew that my father's father was dead and that my Uncle Oscar was dead and that my Uncle David was dead and that each of these instances was unnatural. And I saw it in my own father, who loves you, who counsels you, who slipped me money to care for you. My father was so very afraid. I felt it in the sting of his black leather belt, which he applied with more anxiety than anger, my father who beat me as if someone might steal me away, because that is exactly what was happening all around us. Everyone had lost a child, somehow, to the streets, to jail, to drugs, to guns. It was said that these lost girls were sweet as honey and would not hurt a fly. It was said that these lost boys had just received a GED and had begun to turn their lives around. And now they were gone, and their legacy was a great fear.

When I was 6, Ma and Dad took me to a local park. I slipped from their gaze and found a playground. Your grandparents spent anxious minutes looking for me. When they found me, Dad did what every parent I knew would have done—he reached for his belt. I remember watching him in a kind of daze, awed at the distance between punishment and offense. Later, I would hear it in Dad's voice—"Either I can beat him, or the police." Maybe that saved me. Maybe it didn't. All I know is, the violence rose from the fear like smoke from a fire, and I cannot say whether that violence, even administered in fear and love, sounded the alarm or choked us at the exit. What I know is that fathers who slammed their teenage boys for sass would then release them to streets where these boys employed, and were subject to, the same justice. And I knew mothers who belted their girls, but the belt could not save these girls from drug dealers twice their age.

To be black in the Baltimore of my youth was to be naked before the elements of the world, before all the guns, fists, knives, crack, rape, and disease. The law did not protect us. And now, in your time, the law has become an excuse for stopping and frisking you, which is to say, for furthering the assault on your body. But a society that protects some people through a safety net of schools, government-backed home loans, and ancestral wealth but can protect you only with the club of criminal justice has either failed at enforcing its good intentions or succeeded at something much darker.

I remember being 11 years old, standing out in the parking lot in front of the 7-Eleven, watching a crew of older boys standing near the street. I stood there, marveling at the older boys' beautiful sense of fashion. They all wore ski jackets, the kind that mothers put on layaway in September, then piled up overtime hours so as to have the thing wrapped and ready for Christmas. A light-skinned boy with a long head and small eyes was scowling at another boy, who was standing close to me. It was just before three in the afternoon. I was in sixth grade. School had just let out, and it was not yet the fighting weather of early spring. What was the exact problem here? Who could know?

The boy with the small eyes reached into his ski jacket and pulled out a gun. I recall it in the slowest motion, as though in a dream. There the boy stood, with the gun brandished, which he slowly untucked, tucked, then untucked once more, and in his small eyes I saw a surging rage that could, in an instant, erase my body. That was 1986. That year I felt myself to be drowning in the news reports of murder. I was aware that many of these murders did not land upon the intended targets but fell upon great-aunts, PTA mothers, overtime uncles, and joyful children—fell upon them random and relentless, like great sheets of rain. I knew this in theory but could not understand it as fact until the boy with the small eyes stood across from me holding my entire body in his small hands.

I remember being amazed that death could so easily rise up from the nothing of a boyish afternoon, billow up like fog. I knew that West Baltimore, where I lived; that North Philadelphia, where my cousins lived; that the South Side of Chicago, where friends of my father lived, comprised a world apart. Somewhere out there beyond the firmament, past the asteroid belt, there were other worlds, where children did not regularly fear for their bodies. I knew this because there was a large television in my living room. In the evenings I would sit before this television bearing witness to the dispatches from this other world. There were little white boys with complete collections of football cards, their only want a popular girlfriend and their only worry poison oak. That other world was suburban and endless, organized around pot roasts, blueberry pies, fireworks, ice-cream sundaes, immaculate bathrooms, and small toy trucks that were loosed in wooded backyards with streams and endless lawns. Comparing these dispatches with the facts of my native world, I came to understand that my country was a galaxy, and this galaxy stretched from the pandemonium of West Baltimore to the happy hunting grounds of *Mr. Belvedere*. I obsessed over the

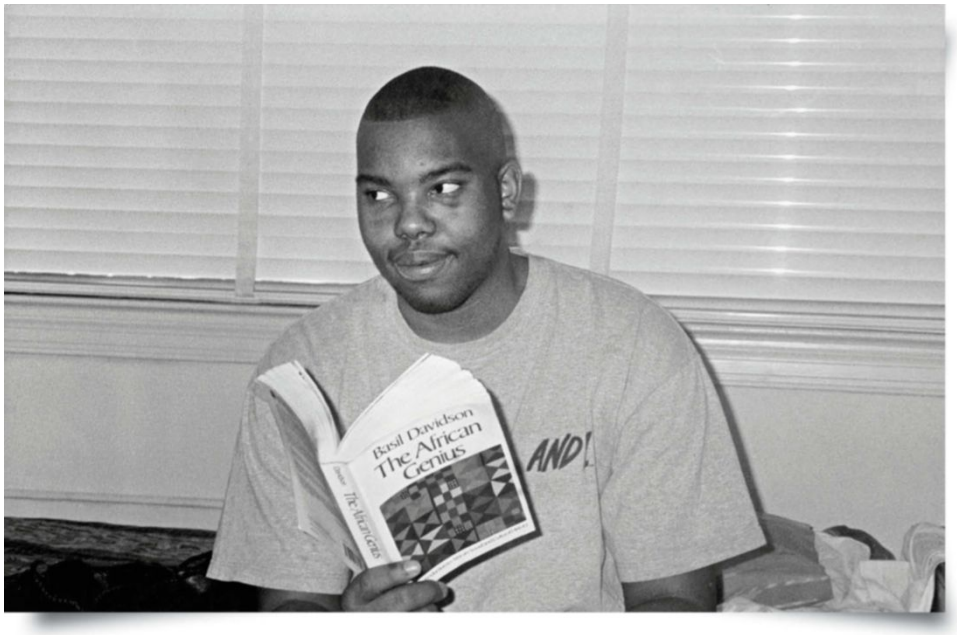
distance between that other sector of space and my own. I knew that my portion of the American galaxy, where bodies were enslaved by a tenacious gravity, was black and that the other, liberated portion was not. I knew that some inscrutable energy preserved the breach. I felt, but did not yet understand, the relation between that other world and me. And I felt in this a cosmic injustice, a profound cruelty, which infused an abiding, irrepressible desire to unshackle my body and achieve the velocity of escape.

Before I could escape, I had to survive, and this could only mean a clash with the streets, by which I mean not just physical blocks, nor simply the people packed into them, but the array of lethal puzzles and strange perils that seem to rise up from the asphalt itself. The streets transform every ordinary day into a series of trick questions, and every incorrect answer risks a beat-down, a shooting, or a pregnancy. No one survives unscathed. When I was your age, fully one-third of my brain was concerned with whom I was walking to school with, our precise number, the manner of our walk, the number of times I smiled, whom or what I smiled at, who offered a pound and who did not—all of which is to say that I practiced the culture of the streets, a culture concerned chiefly with securing the body.

The culture of the streets was essential—there was no alternative. I could not retreat into the church and its mysteries. My parents rejected all dogmas. We spurned the holidays marketed by the people who wanted to be white. We would not stand for their anthems. We would not kneel before their God. "The meek shall inherit the earth" meant nothing to me. The meek were battered in West Baltimore, stomped out at Walbrook Junction, bashed up on Park Heights, and raped in the showers of the city jail. My understanding of the universe was physical, and its moral arc bent toward chaos, then concluded in a box. That was the message of the small-eyed boy untucking the piece—a child bearing the power to banish other children to memory. Fear ruled everything around me, and I knew, as all black people do, that this fear was connected to the world out there, to the unworried boys, to pie and pot roast, to the white fences and green lawns nightly beamed into our television sets.

Every February my classmates and I were herded into assemblies for a ritual review of the civil-rights movement. Our teachers urged us toward the example of freedom marchers, Freedom Riders, and Freedom Summers, and it seemed that the month could not pass without a series of films dedicated to the glories of being beaten on camera. *Why are they showing this to us?* Why were our only heroes nonviolent? Back then all I could do was measure these freedom lovers by what I knew. Which is to say, I measured them against children pulling out in the 7-Eleven parking lot, against parents wielding extension cords, and against the threatening intonations of armed black gangs saying, "Yeah, nigger, what's up now?" I judged them against the country I knew, which had acquired the land through murder and tamed it under slavery, against the country whose armies fanned out across the world to extend its dominion. The world, the real one, was civilization secured and ruled by savage means. How could the schools valorize men and women whose values society actively scorned? How could they send us out into the streets of Baltimore, knowing all that they were, and then speak of nonviolence?

Some things were clear to me: The violence that undergirded the country, so flagrantly on display during Black



The author at a friend's apartment while enrolled at his Mecca, Howard University

History Month, and the intimate violence of the streets were not unrelated. And this violence was not magical, but was of a piece and by design. But what exactly was the design? And why? I must know. I must get out … but into what? I saw the design in those boys on the corner, in "the babies having babies." The design explained everything, from our cracked-out fathers to HIV to the bleached skin of Michael Jackson. I felt this but I could not explain it. Almost every day I played Ice Cube's album *Death Certificate*: "Let me live my life / if we can no longer live our life / then let us give our life / for the liberation and salvation of the black nation." I was haunted by the bodily sacrifice of Malcolm. I was haunted because I believed that we had left ourselves back there, and now in the crack era all we had was a great fear. Perhaps I must go back. That was what I heard in the rapper's call to "keep it real." Perhaps we should return to ourselves, to our own primordial streets, to our own ruggedness, to our own rude hair. Perhaps we should return to Mecca.

I REMEMBER BEING AMAZED THAT DEATH COULD SO EASILY RISE UP FROM THE NOTHING OF A BOYISH AFTERNOON, BILLOW UP LIKE FOG.

MY ONLY MECCA was, is, and shall always be Howard University. This Mecca, my Mecca—The Mecca—is a machine, crafted to capture and concentrate the dark energy of all African peoples and inject it directly into the student body. The Mecca derives its power from the heritage of the university, which in Jim Crow days enjoyed a near-monopoly on black talent. And whereas most other historically black schools were scattered like forts in the great wilderness of the old Confederacy, Howard was in Washington, D.C.—Chocolate City—and thus in proximity to both federal power and black power. I first witnessed this power out on the Yard, that communal green space in the center of the campus where the students gathered and I saw everything I knew of my black self multiplied out into seemingly endless variations. There were the scions of Nigerian aristocrats in their business suits giving dap to bald-headed Ques in purple windbreakers and tan Timbs. There were the high-yellow progeny of AME preachers debating the clerics of Ausar Auset. There were California girls turned Muslim, born anew, in hijab and long skirt. There were Ponzi schemers and Christian cultists, Tabernacle fanatics and mathematical geniuses. It was like listening to 100 different renditions of "Redemption Song," each in a different color and key. And overlaying all of this was the history of Howard itself. I knew that I was literally walking in the footsteps of all the Toni Morrisons and Zora Neale Hurstons, of all the Sterling Browns and Kenneth Clarks, who'd come before.

The Mecca—the vastness of black people across space-time—could be experienced in a 20-minute walk across campus. I saw this vastness in the students chopping it up in front of the Frederick Douglass Memorial Hall, where Muhammad Ali had addressed their fathers and mothers in defiance of the Vietnam War. I saw its epic sweep in the students next to Ira Aldridge Theater, where Donny Hathaway had once sung, where Donald Byrd had once assembled his flock. The students came out with their saxophones, trumpets, and drums, played "My Favorite Things" or "Someday My Prince Will Come." Some of the other students were out on the grass in front of Alain Locke Hall, in pink and green, chanting, singing, stomping, clapping, stepping. Some of them came up from Tubman Quad with their roommates and rope for double Dutch. Some of them came down from Drew Hall, with their caps cocked and their backpacks slung over one arm, then fell into gorgeous ciphers of beatbox and rhyme. Some of the girls sat by the flagpole with bell hooks and Sonia Sanchez in their straw totes. Some of the boys, with their new Yoruba names, beseeched these girls by citing Frantz Fanon. Some of them studied Russian. Some of them worked in bone labs. They were Panamanian. They were Bajan. And some of them were from places I had never heard of. But all of them were hot and incredible, exotic even, though we hailed from the same tribe.

Now, the heirs of slaveholders could never directly acknowledge our beauty or reckon with its power. And so the beauty of the black body was never celebrated in movies, on television shows, or in the textbooks I'd seen as a child. Everyone of any import, from Jesus to George Washington, was white. This was why your grandparents banned *Tarzan* and *The Lone Ranger* and toys with white faces from the house. They were rebelling against the history books that spoke of black people only as sentimental "firsts"—first black four-star general, first black congressman, first black mayor—always presented in the bemused manner of a category of Trivial Pursuit. Serious history was the West, and the West was white. This was all distilled for me in a quote I once read, from the novelist Saul Bellow. I can't remember where I read it, or when—only that I was already at Howard. "Who is the Tolstoy of the Zulus?," Bellow quipped. Tolstoy was "white," I understood him to say, and so Tolstoy "mattered," like everything else that was white "mattered." And this view of things was connected to the fear that passed through the generations, to

the sense of dispossession. We were black, beyond the visible spectrum, beyond civilization. Our history was inferior because we were inferior, which is to say, our bodies were inferior. And our inferior bodies could not possibly be accorded the same respect as those that built the West. Would it not be better, then, if our bodies were civilized, improved, and put to some legitimate Christian use?

And so I came to Howard toting a new and different history, myth really, which inverted all the stories of the people who believed themselves to be white. I majored in history with all the motives of a man looking to fill a trophy case. They had heroes, so we must have heroes too. But my history professors thought nothing of telling me that my search for myth was doomed, that the stories I wanted to tell myself could not be matched to truths. Indeed, they felt it their duty to disabuse me of my weaponized history. Their method was rough and direct; they relentlessly asked questions. Did black skin really convey nobility? Always? Yes. What about the blacks who'd practiced slavery for millennia and sold slaves across the Sahara and then across the sea? Victims of a trick. Would those be the same black kings who birthed all of civilization? Were they then both deposed masters of the galaxy and gullible puppets all at once? And what did I mean by "black"? You know, black. Did I think this a timeless category stretching into the deep past? Yes? Could it be supposed that simply because color was important to me, it had always been so?

This heap of realizations was a weight. I found them physically painful and exhausting. True, I was coming to enjoy the dizziness, the vertigo that must come with any odyssey. But in those early moments, the unceasing contradictions sent me into a gloom. There was nothing holy or particular in my skin; I was black because of history and heritage. There was no nobility in falling, in being bound, in living oppressed, and there was no inherent meaning in black blood. Black blood wasn't black; black skin wasn't even black. And now I looked back on my need for a trophy case, on the desire to live by the standards of Saul Bellow, and I felt that this need was not an escape but fear again—fear that "they," the alleged authors and heirs of the universe, were right. And this fear ran so deep that we accepted their standards of civilization and humanity.

But not all of us. It must have been around this time that I discovered an essay by Ralph Wiley in which he responded to Bellow's quip. "*Tolstoy* is the Tolstoy of the Zulus," wrote Wiley. "Unless you find a profit in fencing off universal properties of mankind into exclusive tribal ownership." And there it was. I had accepted Bellow's premise. In fact, Bellow was no closer to Tolstoy than I was to Nzinga. And if I were closer it would be because I chose to be, not because of destiny written in DNA. My great error was not that I had accepted someone else's dream but that I had accepted the fact of dreams, the need for escape, and the invention of racecraft.

And still and all, I knew that we were something, that we were a tribe—on the one hand, invented, and on the other, no less real. The reality was out there on the Yard, on the first warm day of spring when it seemed that every sector, borough, affiliation, county, and corner of the broad diaspora had sent a delegate to the great world party. I remember those days like an Outkast song, painted in lust and joy. The black world was expanding before me, and I could see now that that world was more than a photonegative of the world of the people who believe they are white. "White America" is a syndicate arrayed to protect its exclusive power to dominate and control our bodies. Sometimes this power is direct (lynching), and sometimes it is insidious (redlining). But however it appears, the power of domination and exclusion is central to the belief in being white, and without it, "white people" would cease to exist for want of reasons. There will surely always be people with straight hair and blue eyes, as there have been for all of history. But some of these straight-haired people with blue eyes have been "black," and this points to the great difference between their world and ours. We did not choose our fences. They were imposed on us by Virginia planters obsessed with enslaving as many Americans as possible. Now I saw that we had made something down here, in slavery, in Jim Crow, in ghettoes. At The Mecca I saw how we had taken their one-drop rule and flipped it. They made us into a race. We made ourselves into a people.

HERE IS WHAT I WOULD LIKE FOR YOU TO KNOW: IN AMERICA, IT IS TRADITIONAL TO DESTROY THE BLACK BODY—*IT IS HERITAGE*.

And what did that mean for the Dreamers I'd seen as a child? Could I ever want to get into the world they made? No. I was born among a people, Samori, and in that realization I knew that I was out of something. It was the psychosis of questioning myself, of constantly wondering whether I could measure up. But the whole theory was wrong, their whole notion of race was wrong. And apprehending that, I felt my first measure of freedom.

This realization was important but intellectual. It could not save my body. Indeed, it made me understand what the loss of all our black bodies really meant. None of us were "black people." We were individuals, and when we died there

was nothing. Always remember that Trayvon Martin was a boy, that Tamir Rice was a particular boy, that Jordan Davis was a boy, like you. When you hear these names, think of all the wealth poured into each one. Think of the gasoline expended, the treads worn carting him to football games, basketball tournaments, and Little League. Think of the time spent regulating sleepovers. Think of the surprise birthday parties, the day care, and the reference checks on babysitters. Think of checks written for family photos. Think of soccer balls, science kits, chemistry sets, racetracks, and model trains. Think of all the embraces, all the private jokes, customs, greetings, names, dreams, all the shared knowledge and capacity of a black family injected into that vessel of flesh and bone. And think of how that vessel was taken, shattered on the concrete, and all its holy contents were sent flowing back into the earth. It is terrible to truly see our particular beauty, Samori, because then you see the scope of the loss. But you must push even further. You must see that this loss is mandated by the history of your country, by the Dream of living white.

YOU MAY VERY WELL REMEMBER that summer when I loaded you and your cousin Christopher into the backseat of a rented car and pushed out to see what remained of Petersburg, Shirley Plantation, and the Wilderness. I was obsessed with the Civil War because 600,000 people had died in it. And yet it had been glossed over in my education, and in popular culture, representations of the war and its reasons seemed obscured. And yet I knew that in 1861 we were enslaved and in 1865 we were not, and what happened to us in those years struck me as having some amount of import. But whenever I visited any of the battlefields, I felt like I was greeted as if I were a nosy accountant conducting an audit and someone was trying to hide the books.

I don't know whether you remember how the film we saw at the Petersburg battlefield ended as though the fall of the Confederacy were the onset of a tragedy, not a jubilee. I doubt you remember the man on our tour dressed in the gray wool of the Confederacy, or how every other visitor seemed most interested in flanking maneuvers, hardtack, smoothbore guns, grapeshot, and ironclads, but virtually no one was interested in what all of this engineering, invention, and design had been marshaled to achieve. You were only 10 years old. But even then I knew that I must trouble you, and this meant taking you into rooms where people would insult your intelligence, where thieves would try to enlist you in your own robbery and disguise their burning and looting as Christian charity. But robbery is what this is, what it always was.

At the onset of the Civil War, our stolen bodies were worth $3 billion, more than all of American industry, all American railroads, workshops, and factories combined, and the prime product rendered by our stolen bodies—cotton—was America's primary export. More millionaires lived in the Mississippi Valley than anywhere else in America at that time, and they made their riches off our stolen bodies. Our bodies were held in bondage by the early presidents. Our bodies were traded from the Oval Office by James K. Polk. Our bodies built the Capitol and the White House. The first shot of the Civil War was fired in South Carolina, where our bodies constituted the majority of human bodies in the state. Here is the motive for the great war. It's not a secret. But we can do better and find the bandit confessing his crime. "Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery," declared Mississippi as it left the Union, "the greatest material interest of the world."

But American reunion was built on a comfortable narrative that made enslavement into benevolence, body snatchers into white knights, and the mass slaughter of the war into a kind of sport in which one could conclude that both sides conducted their affairs with courage, honor, and élan. This lie of the Civil War is the lie of innocence, is the Dream. Historians conjured the Dream. Hollywood fortified the Dream. The Dream was gilded by novels and adventure stories. John Carter flees the broken Confederacy for Mars. We are not supposed to ask what, precisely, he was running from. I, like every kid I knew, loved *The Dukes of Hazzard*. But I would have done well to think more about why two outlaws, driving a car named the General Lee, must necessarily be portrayed as "just some good ole boys, never meanin' no harm"—a mantra for the Dreamers if there ever was one. But what one "means" is neither important nor relevant. It is not necessary that you believe that the officer who choked Eric Garner set out that day to destroy a body. All you need to understand is that the officer carries with him the power of the American state and the weight of an American legacy, and they necessitate that of the bodies destroyed every year, some wild and disproportionate number of them will be black.

Here is what I would like for you to know: in America, it is traditional to destroy the black body—*it is heritage*. Enslavement was not merely the antiseptic borrowing of labor—it is not so easy to get a human being to commit his body against its own elemental interest. And so enslavement must be casual wrath and random manglings, the gashing of heads and brains blown out over the river as the body seeks to escape. It must be rape so regular as to be industrial. There is no uplifting way to say this. I have no praise anthems, nor old Negro spirituals. The spirit and soul are the body and brain, which are destructible—that is precisely why they are so precious. And the soul did not escape. The spirit did not steal away on gospel wings. The soul was the body that fed the tobacco, and the spirit was the blood that watered the cotton, and these created the first fruits of the American garden. And the fruits were secured through the bashing of children with stovewood, through hot iron peeling skin away like husk from corn.

It had to be blood. It had to be the thrashing of kitchen hands for the crime of churning butter at a leisurely clip. It had to be some woman "chear'd ... with thirty lashes a Saturday last and as many more a Tuesday again." It could only be the employment of carriage whips, tongs, iron pokers, handsaws, stones, paperweights, or whatever might be handy to

break the black body, the black family, the black community, the black nation. The bodies were pulverized into stock and marked with insurance. And the bodies were an aspiration, lucrative as Indian land, a veranda, a beautiful wife, or a summer home in the mountains. For the men who needed to believe themselves white, the bodies were the key to a social club, and the right to break the bodies was the mark of civilization. "The two great divisions of society are not the rich and poor, but white and black," said the great South Carolina senator John C. Calhoun. "And all the former, the poor as well as the rich, belong to the upper class, and are respected and treated as equals." And there it is—the right to break the black body as the meaning of their sacred equality. And that right has always given them meaning, has always meant that there was someone down in the valley, because a mountain is not a mountain if there is nothing below.

You and I, my son, are that "below." That was true in 1776. It is true today. There is no them without you, and without the right to break you, they must necessarily fall from the mountain, lose their divinity, and tumble out of the Dream. And then they would have to determine how to build their suburbs on something other than human bones, how to angle their jails toward something other than a human stockyard, how to erect a democracy independent of cannibalism. I would like to tell you that such a day approaches when the people who believe themselves to be white renounce this demon religion and begin to think of themselves as human. But I can see no real promise of such a day. We are captured, surrounded by the majoritarian bandits of America. And this has happened here, in our only home, and the terrible truth is that we cannot will ourselves to an escape on our own.

BUT STILL YOU MUST STRUGGLE. The Struggle is in your name, Samori—you were named for Samori Touré, who struggled against French colonizers for the right to his own black body. He died in captivity, but the profits of that struggle and others like it are ours, even when the object of our struggle, as is so often true, escapes our grasp.

I think now of the old rule that held that should a boy be set upon in someone else's chancy hood, his friends must stand with him, and they must all take their beating together. I now know that within this edict lay the key to all living. None of us were promised to end the fight on our feet, fists raised to the sky. We could not control our enemies' number, strength, or weaponry. Sometimes you just caught a bad one. But whether you fought or ran, you did it together, because that is the part that is in our control. What we must never do is willingly hand over our own bodies or the bodies of our friends. That was the wisdom: we knew we did not lay down the direction of the street, but despite that, we could—and must—fashion the way of our walk. And that is the deeper meaning of your name—that the struggle, in and of itself, has meaning.

That wisdom is not unique to our people, but I think it has special meaning to those of us born out of mass rape, whose ancestors were carried off and divided up into policies and stocks. I have raised you to respect every human being as singular, and you must extend that same respect into the past. Slavery is not an indefinable mass of flesh. It is a particular, specific enslaved woman, whose mind is as active as your own, whose range of feeling is as vast as your own; who prefers the way the light falls in one particular spot in the woods, who enjoys fishing where the water eddies in a nearby stream, who loves her mother in her own complicated way, thinks her sister talks too loud, has a favorite cousin, a favorite season, who excels at dressmaking and knows, inside herself, that she is as intelligent and capable as anyone. "Slavery" is this same woman born in a world that loudly proclaims its love of freedom and inscribes this love in its essential texts, but holds this woman a slave, holds her mother a slave, her father a slave, her daughter a slave, and when this woman peers back into the generations all she sees is the enslaved. She can hope for more. She can imagine some future for her grandchildren. But when she dies, the world—which is really the only world she can ever know—ends. For this woman, enslavement is not a parable. It is damnation. It is the never-ending night. And the length of that night is most of our history. Never forget that we were enslaved in this country longer than we have been free. Never forget that for 250 years black people were born into chains—whole generations followed by more generations who knew nothing but chains.

You must struggle to truly remember this past. You must resist the common urge toward the comforting narrative of divine law, toward fairy tales that imply some irrepressible justice. The enslaved were not bricks in your road, and their lives were not chapters in your redemptive history. They were people turned to fuel for the American machine. Enslavement was not destined to end, and it is wrong to claim our present circumstance—no matter how improved—as the redemption for the lives of people who never asked for the posthumous, untouchable glory of dying for their children. Our triumphs can never redeem this. Perhaps our triumphs are not even the point. Perhaps struggle is all we have. So you must wake up every morning knowing that no natural promise is unbreakable, least of all the promise of waking up at all. This is not despair. These are the preferences of the universe itself: verbs over nouns, actions over states, struggle over hope. The birth of a better world is not ultimately up to you, though I know, each day, there are grown men and women who tell you otherwise. I am not a cynic. I love you, and I love the world, and I love it more with every new inch I discover. But you are a black boy, and you must be responsible for your body in a way that other boys cannot know. Indeed, you must be responsible for the worst actions of other black bodies, which, somehow, will always be assigned to you. And you must be responsible for the bodies of the powerful—the policeman who cracks you with a nightstick will quickly find his excuse in your furtive movements. You have to make your peace with the chaos, but you cannot lie. You cannot forget how much they took from us and how they transfigured our very bodies into sugar, tobacco, cotton, and gold.

Perhaps you remember that time we went to see *Howl's Moving Castle* on the Upper West Side. You were almost 5 years old. The theater was crowded, and when we came

out we rode a set of escalators down to the ground floor. As we came off, you were moving at the dawdling speed of a small child. A white woman pushed you and said, "Come on!" Many things now happened at once. There was the reaction of any parent when a stranger puts a hand on the body of his child. And there was my own insecurity in my ability to protect your black body. And more: There was my sense that this woman was pulling rank. I knew, for instance, that she would not have pushed a black child out on my part of Flatbush, because she would be afraid there and would sense, if not know, that there would be a penalty for such an action. But I was not out on my part of Flatbush. And I was not in West Baltimore. I forgot all of that. I was only aware that someone had invoked their power over the body of my son. I turned and spoke to this woman, and my words were hot with all of the moment and all of my history. She shrank back, shocked. A white man standing nearby spoke up in her defense. I experienced this as his attempt to rescue the damsel from the beast. He had made no such attempt on behalf of my son. And he was now supported by other white people in the assembling crowd. The man came closer. He grew louder. I pushed him away. He said, "I could have you arrested!" I did not care. I told him this, and the desire to do much more was hot in my throat.

YOU ARE A BLACK BOY, AND YOU MUST BE RESPONSIBLE FOR YOUR BODY IN A WAY THAT OTHER BOYS CANNOT KNOW.

This desire was only controllable because I remembered someone standing off to the side there, bearing witness to more fury than he had ever seen from me—you.

I came home shook. I felt a mix of shame for having gone back to the law of the streets, and rage—"I could have you arrested!" Which is to say: "I could take your body."

I have told this story many times, not out of bravado, but out of a need for absolution. But more than any shame I felt, my greatest regret was that in seeking to defend you I was, in fact, endangering you.

"I could have you arrested," he said. Which is to say: "One of your son's earliest memories will be watching the men who sodomized Abner Louima and choked Anthony Baez cuff, club, tase, and break you." I had forgotten the rules, an error as dangerous on the Upper West Side of Manhattan as on the West Side of Baltimore. One must be without error out here. Walk in single file. Work quietly. Pack an extra No. 2 pencil. Make no mistakes.

But you are human and you will make mistakes. You will misjudge. You will yell. You will drink too much. You will hang out with people you shouldn't. Not all of us can always be Jackie Robinson—not even Jackie Robinson was always Jackie Robinson. But the price of error is higher for you than it is for your countrymen, and so that America might justify itself, the story of a black body's destruction must always begin with his or her error, real or imagined—with Eric Garner's anger, with Trayvon Martin's mythical words ("You are gonna die tonight"), with Sean Bell's mistake of running with the wrong crowd, with me standing too close to the small-eyed boy pulling out.

You are called to struggle, not because it assures you victory but because it assures you an honorable and sane life. I am ashamed of how I acted that day, ashamed of endangering your body. I am ashamed that I made an error, knowing that our errors always cost us more.

I am sorry that I cannot make it okay. I am sorry that I cannot save you—but not that sorry. Part of me thinks that your very vulnerability brings you closer to the meaning of life, just as for others, the quest to believe oneself white divides them from it. The fact is that despite their dreams, their lives are also not inviolable. When their own vulnerability becomes real—when the police decide that tactics intended for the ghetto should enjoy wider usage, when their armed society shoots down their children, when nature sends hurricanes against their cities—they are shocked by the rages of logic and the natural world in a way that those of us who were born and bred to understand cause and effect can never be. And I would not have you live like them. You have been cast into a race in which the wind is always at your face and the hounds are always at your heels. And to varying degrees this is true of all life. The difference is that you do not have the privilege of living in ignorance of this essential fact.

I am speaking to you as I always have—treating you as the sober and serious man I have always wanted you to be, who does not apologize for his human feelings, who does not make excuses for his height, his long arms, his beautiful smile. You are growing into consciousness, and my wish for you is that you feel no need to constrict yourself to make other people comfortable. None of that can change the math anyway. I never wanted you to be twice as good as them, so much as I have always wanted you to attack every day of your brief bright life determined to struggle. The people who must believe they are white can never be your measuring stick. I would not have you descend into your own dream. I would have you be a conscious citizen of this terrible and beautiful world. *A*

Ta-Nehisi Coates is an Atlantic *national correspondent. This essay is adapted from his book* Between the World and Me, *which has just been published by Spiegel & Grau.*

THE FIRST ANNUAL *ATLANTIC* AND COLLEGE BOARD WRITING PRIZE

FOR OUR INAUGURAL essay contest, we asked high-school students to choose a document that helped shape the United States and analyze it in fewer than 2,000 words. Students were tasked with limning the historical context of the work and the language its creator chose, and with identifying echoes of its arguments in contemporary life. More than 3,000 students from around the world entered. Forty professors of history, political science, and composition winnowed the essays based on the quality of their analysis, structure, and voice; a panel of College Board experts and Atlantic *staff members made the final selection. Many entries showed strength in one area or another, but the essay below was judged the soundest overall. It has been lightly edited for publication.*

Reading Martin Luther King Jr.

BY NICOLAS YAN

"We have come here today to dramatize an appalling condition."
— The March on Washington, August 28, 1963

MORE THAN 50 YEARS after its delivery, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous refrain of "I have a dream" remains a cry for freedom that has been adopted by activists the world over, from Tiananmen Square to the West Bank. But in order to fully appreciate the magnitude of King's 1963 speech at the March on Washington, we must first understand the context of its delivery. King spoke of an America whose black population was "sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination." That he framed his words with images of slavery was no accident. President Abraham Lincoln had issued the Emancipation Proclamation a century prior, but the Jim Crow laws, which mandated racial segregation, were still in full force throughout the South. Just 10 weeks before King's speech, Governor George Wallace had attempted to obstruct two African American students from enrolling at the University of Alabama; President John F. Kennedy had to send the National Guard to make the governor stand down. Meanwhile, the civil-rights movement was blossoming across the country. Peaceful sit-ins and boycotts—à la Rosa Parks—had yielded to violent action by 1963, most notably in the Birmingham riot of May. As King noted in his speech, these "whirlwinds of revolt," characterized by riots and militant demonstrations, blustered through 100 towns and cities nationwide.

The environment was ripe for change. To this end, King helped organize an ambitious political rally in the nation's capital in August, along with five other prominent civil-rights leaders. On August 28, roughly 250,000 protesters gathered in front of the Lincoln Memorial. By late afternoon, the marchers had begun to fade in the oppressive summer heat. Among them was the author Norman Mailer, who later recalled "a little of the muted disappointment which attacks the crowd in the seventh

inning of a very important baseball game when the score has gone eleven-to-three." Many were already leaving by the time King was slated to speak.

The months leading up to August 28, 1963, had been tumultuous for King. Not only had he been the victim of multiple death threats and attempts on his life, but he had also attracted fierce opposition from within the civil-rights movement itself. Malcolm X, a leader of the Nation of Islam, had disparagingly dubbed the march the "Farce on Washington." King had also been arrested, for the 13th time, during the Birmingham campaign only a few months earlier. Nevertheless, he now found himself at the wheel of a massive vehicle for change; almost a quarter of a million activists anxiously waited for him to begin his address. As he strode to the lectern, the words of a song his friend Mahalia Jackson, a gospel singer, had sung earlier that day reverberated in his ears: "I've been 'buked and I've been scorned ... I cannot make it alone." She had performed this old spiritual at King's personal request, and his mood at the time may well have mirrored the words of the song.

It was in this somber vein that King began his speech. He adhered closely to his prepared text at first, grandly recapitulating the multitude of injustices that African Americans faced. His background as a Southern Baptist preacher was readily apparent; he spoke slowly and paused at regular intervals, imbuing each word with ministerial gravity.

King began by invoking Lincoln's famous Gettysburg Address, setting his words in the appropriate temporal context: "Five score years ago ..." This was the first in a number of instances when King deliberately anchored his speech in the architectural documents of Western literature, and then appropriated the original ideas to suit his own ends. King also made explicit reference to the Constitution. By associating his speech with these founding documents of the nation, King infused his words with credibility and familiarity.

Similarly, King effectively employed the extended metaphor of an unpaid debt to justify the African American rationale for protest. First he likened the "unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" guaranteed by the Declaration of Independence to a "promissory note" for all Americans. Then he characterized the March on Washington as a mission "to cash this check"—a mission that was 100 years overdue. He lamented how, over the previous century, America's "bank of justice" had marked this check with "insufficient funds" for its "citizens of color," and he explained the refusal of African Americans to accept this injustice. This metaphor served as a narration of the events leading up to the march, and emphasized that "the Negro's legitimate discontent" was directed at the legislature. Indeed, King made the point that the underlying aim of the march—"citizenship rights" for all people—was no different from that of the nation's Founding Fathers in 1776.

King also introduced a number of biblical allusions. Like Lincoln, King had a deep knowledge of scripture—he quoted verses from Amos and Isaiah, and subtly referenced passages from Psalms and Galatians. These allusions surely resonated with large portions of his audience, and gave his words an added layer of depth. We can also draw similarities between King's depiction of "the Negro" who "finds himself an exile in his own land" and the plight of the Israelites in the Book of Exodus. This comparison served to paint the civil-rights movement in a sympathetic light, and to inspire hope. Under the leadership of the prophet Moses, the Israelites finally escaped oppression and found deliverance in the promised land; King implied that African Americans could find solace in this historical precedent, and that they too would be liberated in due course.

"TELL 'EM ABOUT THE DREAM, MARTIN!," MAHALIA JACKSON CRIED. AT THIS POINT, KING'S ORATION LEAPT TO LIFE.

Up to this point, King's speech had certainly been eloquent, but many members of the audience had expected something more, given his stellar reputation as an orator. John Lewis, a student leader of the march who later became a congressman, recalled that the speech thus far "was not nearly as powerful as many I had heard him make." Mahalia Jackson must have shared his sentiment, for as King neared the end of his prepared remarks, she suddenly cried out: "Tell 'em about the dream, Martin! Tell 'em about the dream!"

At this point, King's oration leapt to life. The speech took on an extemporaneous nature and grew from an articulate summary of grievances into something transcendent. Jackson had heard him speak about his dream earlier that year; King now seized this established motif and ran with it. He sharply contrasted racism with tolerance, and prejudice with liberality: "I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood." King also

drew upon his personal situation to stimulate emotion, invoking his children to symbolize innocence and virtue: "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." The parallel construction of these sentences reaffirmed the shift in King's speech from a bleak account of past wrongs to a sincere expression of hope for the future.

Remarkably, King's peroration was largely spontaneous. He had experimented with the refrain of "I have a dream" on a few prior occasions, but had not included it in his prepared text. In retrospect, it is significant that King used the word *dream* to convey his vision. We tend to label dreams as unreal conditions, but King's doctorate in theology suggests that he may have intended to frame his dream in the biblical sense. Particularly in the Old Testament, dreams were used to convey God's plan, and signified a promise that would inevitably be fulfilled. Knowing this, it is possible to interpret his dream as a promise to the American people that one day, freedom would "ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city" across the country.

KING'S WORDS RING JUST AS TRUE IN MY HOME COUNTRY OF NEW ZEALAND TODAY AS THEY DID IN WASHINGTON 52 YEARS AGO.

America can still find resonance in King's words today. The speech has played an integral role in improving race relations since the 1960s, but King's dream has yet to be fully realized—he himself recognized that the events of 1963 were "not an end, but a beginning." Congress passed the Civil Rights Act a year after his speech, but recently, controversy over what King in his "Dream" speech called "the winds of police brutality," such as in the cases of Michael Brown and Freddie Gray, has "staggered" the country. The Voting Rights Act was passed in 1965, but debate continues to rage over new voter-identification laws that reduce turnout among African Americans. Protesters marched in 1963 under the collective banner of "Jobs and Freedom," yet the unemployment rate for African Americans (9.5 percent) remains more than twice that for whites (4.6 percent).

King's message cannot be confined only to America; his words ring just as true in my home country of New Zealand today as they did in Washington 52 years ago. Despite the fact that New Zealand is more than 6,500 miles removed from America, its Maori population suffers from the same socioeconomic factors and racial discrimination that have continued to plague African Americans.

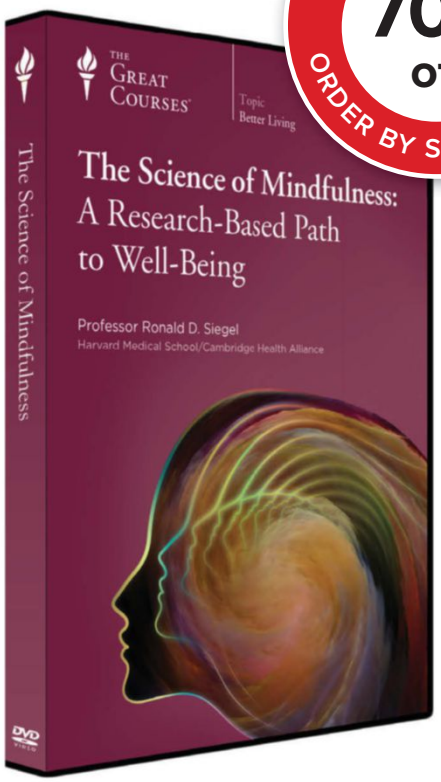
Partly inspired by the civil-rights movement in America, Maoris waged a parallel struggle against racism in New Zealand during the 1970s. Just as African Americans called for recognition of their constitutional rights, a radical Maori protest group called Ngā Tamatoa (Young Warriors) staged street demonstrations and land occupations to campaign for proper recognition of the Treaty of Waitangi, New Zealand's founding document. And just as King led civil-rights protesters to march on Washington in 1963, Dame Whina Cooper in 1975 led a historic land march from the northern tip of New Zealand's North Island to the country's parliament, in Wellington, to protest the relentless alienation of Maori land. As President Jimmy Carter among others has noted, King, through his campaign for equal rights, not only helped to free African Americans, but "helped to free all people."

It is unlikely King ever envisaged that on the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington, a Maori contingent would perform a stirring *haka* (traditional war cry) on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. It is even more unlikely that King envisaged that the day's celebrations would culminate with America's first black president addressing the nation. But in 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. dared to dream, and today, the "beautiful symphony of brotherhood" that King anticipated for his four children is a far brighter prospect than it was when he delivered his speech. Today we harbor hope that tomorrow, all of God's children will finally be able to hold hands and repeat after King: "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!" *A*

Nicolas Yan, 17 years old, is entering his final year of secondary school at King's College in Auckland, New Zealand.

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FICTION

Scenes From a Marriage

By LAUREN GROFF

PHOTOGRAPH BY RICHARD GIN

THE SUN SHIFTED to reclining. It was six at night. Mild, end of autumn. Chill in the air like a premonition.

Susannah came through the garden door. She found Mathilde alone, tossing Bibb lettuce in vinaigrette in the galley kitchen.

"Did you hear? We're sick about it," Susannah said, but was struck silent when Mathilde turned her face toward her. Earlier, Susannah had thought that walking into the apartment with its new coat of bright yellow paint had been like walking into the sun, blinding. But now the color played with the cinnamon freckles on Mathilde's face. She'd gotten an asymmetrical haircut, her blond hair lopped at the right jawbone and at the left collar, and it set off her high cheekbones. Susannah felt a pulse of attraction. Odd. All this time, Mathilde had seemed plain, shadowed by her husband's light, but now the pairing clicked. Mathilde was ravishing.

"Did I hear what?," Mathilde said.

"Oh, Mathilde. Your hair," Susannah said. "It's wonderful."

Mathilde put a hand up to it and said, "Thanks. What did I hear?"

"Right," Susannah said, and picked up the two bottles of wine Mathilde indicated with her chin. She said, as she followed Mathilde out the entryway, up the back stairs, "You know Kristina, from our class? In that a cappella group the Zaftones? Inky hair and, well, zaftig? I think Lotto and she—" Susannah made a face to herself, *Oh, you dummy*, and Mathilde paused on the step, then waved a hand as if to say, *Oh, yes, Lotto and everybody screwed like bonobos*, which Susannah had to admit was true, and they came up into the garden. They stopped, autumn-struck. Lotto and Mathilde had spread out thrift-store sheets on the grass and their friends had arranged the potluck in the middle, and everyone was lounging quietly, eyes closed in the last morsel of chill fall sun, drinking cold white wine and Belgian beer, waiting for the first person to reach in and take food.

Mathilde put her salad bowl down and said, "Eat, kiddos." Lotto smiled up at her and took a mini spanakopita from a warm pile. The rest of them, a dozen or so, huddled over the food and began talking again.

Susannah stood on her toes and said into Mathilde's ear, "Kristina. She killed herself. Hanged herself in the bathroom.



Out of the blue, only yesterday. Nobody knew she was miserable. She had a boyfriend and a job and an apartment in the nice part of Harlem and everything. Makes no sense."

Mathilde had gone very still and lost her constant small smile. Susannah knelt and served herself watermelon, cutting the big pieces into slivers: she wasn't eating real food anymore, because she had a new TV role she was too embarrassed to talk about in front of Lotto. For one thing, it wasn't *Hamlet*, in which he'd shined so brilliantly their last semester in college. It was just a job as a teenager on a soap opera; she knew she was selling out. And yet it was more than anything Lotto had gotten since they'd graduated. He'd been the understudy in a few off-off-Broadway things; he'd had a tiny role at the Actors Theatre of Louisville. That was it for a year and a half. Lotto returned to her again as he'd looked at the end of *Hamlet*, bowing, having sweated through his costume, and she'd felt awe, had shouted "Bravo!" from the audience, having lost the role of Ophelia to a girl with huge boobs bared naked in the pond scene, that ho-bag slut. Susannah bit into her watermelon and swallowed a pulse of victory. She loved Lotto more, in pitying.

Above the scrum, Mathilde shivered and pulled her cardigan closer. A burgundy leaf fell from the Japanese maple and landed upright in the spinach-artichoke dip. It was chilly in the shade under the tree. Soon there would be the long winter, cold and white. An erasure of this night, the garden. She plugged in the strand of Christmas lights that they had twined through the branches above, and the tree sparked into a dendrite. She sat behind her husband because she wanted to hide, and his back was so beautiful, broad and muscled, that she rested her face there and felt comforted. She listened to his voice muffled through his chest, the smooth edge of his southern accent.

"... Two old men sitting on a porch, shooting the sea breeze," Lotto was saying: so, a joke. "This old hound dog comes out and circles around in the dust and sits down and starts licking at his junk. Slurping and gulping and loving the heck out of his pink little stump. A tube of lipstick all the way extended. So one of the old guys winks at his friend and says, 'Man, I sure wish *I* could do that.' And the other old guy says, 'Pshaw! That dog would *bite* you.'"

They all laughed, not so much at the joke, but at the way Lotto delivered it, the pleasure he took. The warmth of her husband through his polo shirt began to break up the clod of dread in Mathilde. Kristina had lived on her freshman floor. Mathilde had walked in on her once crying in the co-ed showers, had recognized her beautiful alto voice, and had walked out again, choosing to give the gift of privacy over that of comfort. Only in retrospect was that the worse choice.

Lotto reached behind him for Mathilde and scooped her sideways into his lap with his paw. His stomach rumbled, but he couldn't eat more than a bite or two: he'd been waiting for a callback for a week now, unwilling to leave the apartment for fear of missing it. Mathilde had proposed the potluck to get his mind off it all. The role was for Claudio in *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare in the Park next summer. He could see himself in a doublet in front of thousands. Bats darting. Dusk shooting pink flares overhead. Since graduation, he had worked steadily, if in small roles. He had gotten Equity. This was the next step skyward.

It had become painfully apparent over their short marriage that he was not worth the salt she sweated.

He looked inside the apartment, through the window, where the phone persisted in unringing on the mantel. Behind it was the painting Mathilde had brought home a few months earlier from the gallery where she'd worked for the past year. After its artist had stormed out, flinging the canvas against the wall and breaking the stretcher, the gallery owner told her to toss it in the dumpster. Instead, Mathilde took the broken painting, restretched it, framed it, and hung it behind the brass Buddha. It was a blue abstract and reminded Lotto of the moment every morning before dawn, a misty dim world between worlds. What's the word? *Eldritch*. Like Mathilde herself. He would come home some days after auditions to find her sitting in the dark, staring up at the painting with a glass of red wine cradled in both hands, a vague look on her face.

"Should I be worried?" he'd said once, after an audition for a part he didn't even want, when he found her sitting there in the darkening room. He kissed her behind the ear.

"No. I'm just so happy," she had said.

He didn't say that it had been a long day, that he'd had to wait in the drizzle on the street for two hours, that after he finally went in and read his lines and went out the door, he'd heard the director say, "Stellar. Too bad he's a giant." That his agent wasn't returning his calls. That he would have relished a nice dinner for once. Because, in truth, he didn't mind. If she was happy, it meant she wouldn't leave him, and it had become painfully apparent over their short marriage that he was not worth the salt she sweated. The woman was a saint. She saved, fretted, somehow paid their bills when he brought in nothing. He had sat beside her until it was fully dark, and she turned with a rustling of silk and he carried her to bed without eating.

Now Mathilde lifted a piece of salmon burger to Lotto's lips, and though he didn't want it, she was looking at him and the gold specks in her eyes glittered, and he took the bite off the fork. He kissed her on the freckled bridge of her nose.

"Disgusting," Arnie called from his distant sheet. His arm was around some tattooed chick he was dating from his bar. "You've been married for a year. Honeymoon's over."

"Never," Mathilde and Lotto said, at once. They did jinx pinkies.

"What's it like?," Natalie said quietly. "Marriage, I mean."

Mathilde said, "Kipling called it a very long conversation."

Lotto looked at his wife, touched her cheek. "Yes," he said.

Chollie leaned toward Danica, who leaned away. He whispered, "You owe me a million bucks."

"What?" she snapped. She was dying for a chicken leg, but had to plow through a heap of salad before she would allow herself anything fatty.

"Last year, at their housewarming," Chollie said. "We bet a million bucks they'd be divorced by now. You lose."

They looked at Lotto and Mathilde, so handsome, the still axis of the garden. "I don't know. How much of it's an act?,"

Danica said. "There's some sort of darkness there. Probably that he's pretending to be faithful and she's pretending not to care."

"You're mean," Chollie said with admiration. "What's your beef with Lotto? Were you one of his vanquished millions? They all still love him. I ran into that girl Bridget who was calling herself his girlfriend in college, and she burst into tears when she asked about him. He was the love of her life."

Danica's eyes and mouth tightened. Chollie laughed, revealing a roil of lasagna. "Naw, it's the opposite," he said. "He never went for you."

"If you don't shut up, you're getting salad in the kisser," she said.

They sat for a long moment, eating, pretending to eat. Then Danica said, "Fine. Double or nothing. But I get longer. Six years. Until 1998. And they'll be divorced and you'll pay me 2 million bucks and I'll get an apartment in Paris. *Enfin*."

Chollie blinked, bulged. "You're assuming that I'll be able to pay."

"Of course you will. You're the kind of slimy little man who makes a hundred million dollars by your 30s," Danica said.

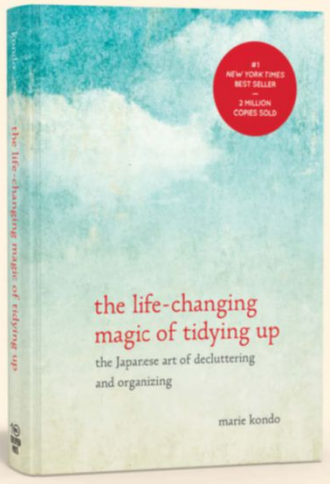
Chollie said, "That's the nicest thing anyone ever said about me."

When the shadows had thickened just enough for the gesture to be hidden, Susannah gave Natalie a pinch on the rear. They laughed into their cups. It had been tacitly agreed upon: another night they would end up at Susannah's. Only Natalie knew about Susannah's new role as the bratty daughter of a soap-opera villain; only Natalie knew about the new rising sea of feeling between them. "My career would die before it was born if everyone knew I was a big fat lesbo," Susannah had said. Something had sat wrong with Natalie, but she kept it in, let Susannah blaze inside her all day while she stood at her sad gray desk trading commodities, her bank account spinning richer second by second.

Natalie was looking better, Lotto thought, watching her brushing her hand over the last of the mint. She had bleached the moustache, lost weight, was dressing with flair. She had found the beauty he'd known was there all along. He smiled at her, and she blushed, smiled back.

Their eating slowed. The group fell silent. Caramel brownies went around. Some of the friends watched the creamy

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unfurl of a contrail in the darkling sky, and there was a poignancy in the way it disappeared, and this made most of them think about the dead black-haired girl, that they'd never again feel her arms around their necks in a hug. She had smelled like oranges.

"I found a boy who'd hung himself in prep school," Lotto said suddenly. "Hanged himself." They looked at his face with interest. He was pale, grim. They waited for the story, because there was always a story with Lotto, but he didn't say anything more. Mathilde took his hand.

"You never said," she whispered.

"Tell you later," he said. Poor pustulous Jelly Roll dangled ghostly in the garden for a breath; Lotto passed his hand over his face, and the boy was gone.

Someone said, "Look! The moon!" and there it was, hove up like a ship in the navy edge of sky, and it filled them all with longing.

Rachel sat down beside Lotto, leaning into her brother's warmth. She was up for fall break, had pierced her ears all the way around, and wore her hair long in the front, shaved in the back. Radical for a 10-year-old, but she needed to do *something*, otherwise she looked a slight 6 with jittery hands, and from her studies of her cohort, she understood that it was better to be weird than twee. She had just gone in and put the envelope with her last year's allowance in Mathilde's underwear drawer, dabbling her hands among the silks; it had not escaped Rachel that her brother's cabinets were bare, that Mathilde had called Aunt Sallie last month, that Sallie had sent cash. Now she was watching the window on the second floor where she had seen a fluttering edge of curtain, half a fist, one eye. Rachel pictured an interior with wallpapered ceilings. Cats with infirmities, Cyclops cats and cats with nubs for tails and gouty, swollen-pawed cats. Stink of joint rub. Bowl of minestrone heated in the microwave. Sad old woman inside. Their mother was heading fast toward that same future, the tiny pink beach house a tomb of figurines and chintz. Muvva loved the sound of the sea, she told Rachel, but Rachel had never even seen her go out onto the sand. She just stayed in her little pink aquarium of a house like a suckerfish, gobblemouthing the glass. Poor Muvva. I will never be old, Rachel promised herself. I will never be sad. I'd scarf a cyanide capsule first, kill myself like that friend of Lotto's everyone is crying about. Life isn't worth living unless you are young and surrounded by other young people in a beautiful cold garden perfumed by dirt and flowers and fallen leaves, gleaming in the string of lights, listening to the quiet city on the last fine night of the year.

The cat was startled that they were startled, because she had smelled the rain long before she heard it.

Under the dying angel's-trumpet plant, the old lady's tabby watched. Confusing, these people lounging around their food like enormous cats sated from the kill. She longed to pad in and investigate, but there were too many of

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them, and they were so sudden, so unpredictable. Just so: at once the people rose, shrieking, gathering things up in their arms, rushing about. The cat was startled that they were startled, because she had smelled the rain long before she heard it. A spoon fell from a bowl of tabbouleh and spun into the dirt and was abandoned, spattered by the mud kicked up by the first raindrops. The people were gone. A hand came out of a ground-level window and unplugged the tree lights. In the plunge of darkness, the yellow cord writhed into the window like a snake and the cat hungered to chase it, but it disappeared and the window closed. The cat dabbed her paw delicately at one fat drop on the edge of a leaf, then galloped across the yard and went inside.

THE DOOR TO the apartment opened; in leapt the goblin. It was nine at night, unseasonably cold. Behind the goblin came Miss Piggy, a skeleton, a ghost. Albert Einstein, moonwalking. Samuel came in wearing a lampshade for a hat, and around his waist a cardboard box painted to resemble a bedside table, with a magazine and two condom wrappers glued on top. Lotto, in a toga and crowned by gilded bay leaves, put his beer down on Samuel's tabletop and said, "Hello! You're a nightstand. A one-night stand. Ha-ha." A murdered prom queen froufroued by, muttering, "Wishful thinking." Samuel said, "I think that was my ex-girlfriend," grinned, went to the fridge for a beer.

"Since when does it snow on Halloween? Global warming, schmobal schwarming," Luanne said, stomping her boots on the rattan mat. She was Mathilde's friend from the gallery and was painted up cleverly as Picasso's Dora Maar, the one with the bitten apple for a cheek. She kissed Lotto lingeringly, saying, "Oh, *hail* yes, Caesar." He laughed too loudly, pulling away. Luanne was trouble. Mathilde came home most days with stories about how she tried to seduce their boss, some gross bulgy-eyed man with vaudeville eyebrows named Ariel. "Why?" said Lotto. "She's pretty. She's young. She could do way better." And Mathilde shot him a look and said, "Babe. He's *rich*," and, of course, that explained it. Together Lotto and Luanne went toward Mathilde, who was resplendent in full Cleopatra, eating a cupcake beside the Buddha on the mantel adorned with sunglasses and a lei. Lotto dipped his wife and licked the crumbs from her lips as she laughed.

"Yuck," Luanne said. "You guys can't be freaking real." She went to the kitchen, took a Zima from the fridge, moodily sipped, made a face. She'd gauged the low state of Lotto's mind by the size of his belly and how crowded the apartment was with used books; in his low moments, reading was all Lotto could do. Funny, because he seemed like such a huge goofball, and then he opened his mouth and quoted paragraphs of Wittgenstein or something. It unnerved her, the gap between who he appeared to be and the person he held inside him.

Someone put on a Nirvana CD and girls got up from the leather couch Lotto had rescued from the sidewalk. They attempted to dance but gave up, put *Thriller* on again.

Chollie, a green goblin, sidled up to Lotto and Mathilde, slurringly drunk. "I never noticed how close-set your eyes are, Mathilde, and how wide yours are, Lotto." He made a stabbing motion with two fingers at Mathilde and said, "Predator," then stabbed at Lotto and said, "Prey."

"I'm the prey and Mathilde's the predator?," Lotto said. "Please. I'm her predator. Her sexual predator," he said, and everyone groaned. Luanne was gazing at Arnie across the room. She made an impatient motion with her hand. "Shut up, you guys," she said. "I'm ogling."

Mathilde sighed, backed away.

"Wait. Who? Oh, Arnie," Chollie said, spiteful. Disappointed? "Please. He's so stupid."

"Dumb as a dead bulb," Luanne said. "Exactly my point."

"Arnie?" said Lotto. "Arnie was a neuroscience major in college. He's no dumbo. Just because he didn't go to Harvard like you doesn't make him dumb."

"I don't know. Maybe he's pickled his brains with booze," Luanne said. "At your last party I overheard him say that Sting is his spirit animal."

Lotto gave a whistle across the room; Arnie-as-the-Hulk looked up from the sea of girls for whom he was making chocolate martinis. He made his way over to Lotto, clapping him on the shoulder. Chollie and Arnie were both painted green. Side by side, Arnie was the pneumatic before and Chollie the punctured after.



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Lotto told Arnie, "Luanne said she'd jump your bones if you can define *hermeneutics* in a satisfactory manner," and he steered the two into the bedroom, closed the door.

"God," Chollie said. "I'd die."

"They haven't come out of the room yet," said Lotto. "Some Cupids kill with arrows, some with traps."

"Shakespeare again?," Chollie said.

"Forever."

Chollie stalked away. Lotto was alone. When he looked up, he saw only himself reflected in the night-blackened windows, the belly that had developed during his blue summer this year, the shine at the temples where his hair was going. Three and a half years out of college, and Mathilde was still paying the bills. Lotto rubbed the Buddha's head sadly and walked past a covey of witches hunched over someone's Polaroid paper, faces summoned out of the murk.

Up before Lotto rose a vision of himself attached to a hundred shining strings by his fingers, eyelids, toes, the muscles of his mouth.

Mathilde's back was turned, and she was speaking low to Susannah. Lotto crept forward and knew she was talking about him. "—better. Coffee commercial in September. Father and toddler out on a fishing boat at dawn. Apparently the kid fell in and Lotto fished him out with an oar and saved his life. Our hero!"

They laughed together, and Susannah said, "I know! Folgers. I've seen it. Dawn, a cabin in the woods, the kid waking up on a rowboat. He's so striking, Lotto. Especially with a beard."

"Tell all the directors you know, get him a job," Mathilde said, and Susannah said, "For what?" and Mathilde said, "Anything at all," and Susannah gave a half-mouthed smile and said, "I'll see what I can do."

Lotto, stung, hurried away without letting them see him.

Mathilde was never unkind, but she wore her passive aggression like a second skin. If she didn't like her food at a restaurant, she wouldn't touch it, keeping her

eyes low and saying nothing until Lotto was forced to tell the waiter the food was too salty or undercooked and could they please have something else, thanks so much, buddy. She once maneuvered an invitation to a wedding on Martha's Vineyard by standing next to the bride-to-be all night, a big-time Broadway actress, smiling gently but not speaking a word until the bride impulsively asked them to come. They attended, danced; he charmed a producer and got a callback for a revival of *My Fair Lady*, though his voice was not great, and he didn't get the role. They sent the actress a very nice set of antique silver grapefruit spoons they'd bought in a thrift store and polished to appear expensive.

Up before Lotto rose a vision of himself attached to a hundred shining strings by his fingers, eyelids, toes, the muscles of his mouth. All the strings led to Mathilde's pointer finger, and she moved it with the subtlest of twitches and made him dance.

The Chollie goblin came to a stop next to Mathilde, and together they watched Lotto across the room in a ring of boys: a bottle of bourbon hung between the hook of two fingers, the gold circlet of leaves flapping off the back of his head.

"What's eating your ass?," Chollie said. "You seem off."

Mathilde sighed and said, "There's something wrong with him."

"I think he's fine," Chollie said. "We only have to worry if he's way up or way down. He's coming out of the dip from the summer." He paused, watched Lotto. "At least he's losing his potbelly."

"Thank God," she said. "All summer I thought he was about to jump in front of a train. He needs to get a role. Some days he never leaves the apartment." She shook herself resolutely. "Anyway. How's the used-car business?"

"Quit," Chollie said. "I'm in real estate now. In 15 years, I'll own half of Manhattan."

"Right," Mathilde said. Then, suddenly, "I'm leaving the gallery." They both looked startled. "Okay," Chollie said. "Who'll support the genius?"

"I'll work. I got a job at some Internet start-up. A dating site. Begin in a week. I haven't told anyone yet, not Luanne or Ariel or Lotto. It's just—I needed a change. I thought my future would be in art. It's not."

"Is it in the Internet?"

"All of our futures," she said, "exist in the Internet." They smiled together into their drinks.

"Why are you telling me?" said Chollie, after some time. "I mean, I'm a weird choice of a confidant. You know?"

"Don't know," Mathilde said. "I can't tell if you're benign or malignant. But I feel like I could tell you all my secrets right now and you'd keep them to yourself, waiting for when best to deploy them."

Chollie went very still, watchful. "Tell me all your secrets," he said.

"Fat chance," she said. She left him and went across the room to her husband and whispered in his ear. Lotto's eyes widened, and he bit down on a grin and didn't watch his wife as she skirted the party and went out the apartment's front door, turning down the dimmer switch on her way so that the only illumination in the room was from the flicker of the jack-o'-lanterns.

After a minute, Lotto went out the door with ostentatious nonchalance, up the stairs, and found Mathilde outside the old lady's door. Their party churned below; from within, he hadn't been aware it was so loud. He wondered why the old lady hadn't called the cops yet, as she usually did. Still before 10, perhaps. There was a flush of cold as the front door opened and a clump of clowns clattered down the stairs to the party, and Lotto's exposed buttocks prickled with goose bumps. But the front door closed; the door to their apartment opened and the party swallowed the clowns. He loosed Mathilde's left breast from her bustier, his mouth on the curve of her throat.

He turned her around to press her cheek against the door, but she struggled back, her eyes flashing, and he submitted to the standing missionary.

Inside the second-floor apartment, Bette was eating a runny egg sandwich alone in the dark, kept up by the festivities below. Now, unmistakable, a creak on the stairway, and Bette thrilled to the thought of a burglar, the tiny gun she kept in the fern stand. She put the sandwich down and pressed her ear to the door. But here was another creaking, a murmur. Some preparatory thumps. Indeed! This was happening. It had been so very long since her Hugh, but what had passed between them still felt



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fresh to her, a peach bitten into. Felt like yesterday, all that bodily joy. Begun so young they didn't even know what they were doing and they wouldn't give it up, so when they were old enough, they married. Not the worst thing to build a marriage around, such juice. The first years had been delirious, the latter ones merely happy.

The girl on the landing moaned. The boy was muttering, but not so distinctly that Bette could understand the words, and the girl's moans became louder, then were muffled as if she were biting something—his shoulder? The rattling of the door was strenuous. Bette pushed herself against the heaving wood. Such athletes. Put Bette in mind of the monkey house on a Sunday visit to the zoo, the capuchins' gleeful whoring.

A mingled half-shout, and Bette whispered to her tabby figure-eighting her ankles, "Trick or treat, old girl. Indeed."

Out on the landing was hoarse breathing and rustling. Oh, she knew who it was, the strange-looking giant from downstairs and his tall, plain wife, though she would pretend that she didn't, to save embarrassment when they met in the foyer. Then the footsteps down, away, the music intensifying then quieting as their door opened and closed, and Bette was alone again. Now for a stiff scotch and a toddle off to bed, dovey, like the good girl you've become.

"HALLELUJAH," Chollie said, knocking back an eggnog, mostly brandy. It was 11 o'clock. "Christ is born." He and Lotto were silently competing to see who could be drunker. Lotto hid it better, seemed normal, but the room spun if he didn't blink it straight.

Outside, a thickness of night. Streetlights were lollipops of bright snow.

Aunt Sallie hadn't stopped talking for hours, and now she was saying, "... course, I don't know nothing, being not as sophisticated as all y'all college grads, and I sure as heck can't tell you what to do, Lotto, my boy, but if it was me, which it isn't, I know, but if it was, I'd say I done gave it my all, be mighty proud of the three-four plays I done these past years, and say, 'Well, not everybody can be Richard Burton, and maybe I got something else I can do with my life.' Like maybe, oh, take over the trust or something. Get back in your mother's graces. Get undisinherited. You know she's faring poorly, that sick heart of hers. Rachel and you both stand to gain a lot when she passes, God forbid it be soon." She looked at Lotto cannily over her canary's beak.

The Buddha laughed in silence from the mantelpiece. Around him, a lushness of poinsettias. Below, a fire Lotto had dared to make out of sticks collected from the park. Later, there would be a chimney fire, a sound of wind like a rushing freight train and the trucks arriving in the night.

"I'm struggling," Lotto said. "Maybe. But come on, I was born wealthy, white, and male. I'd have nothing to work with if I didn't have a little struggle. I'm doing what I love. That's not nothing." It sounded mechanical, even to his own ears. Bad acting, Lotto. His heart wasn't in the fight anymore.

"What's success, anyway?" said Rachel. "I say it's being able to work as much as you want at whatever lights you up. Lotto's had steady work all these years."

"I love you," Lotto said to his sister. She was in high school, as skinny as Sallie. Her friends couldn't believe that Lotto and she were related. Only Lotto thought her stunning, planar. Her thin face reminded him of a Giacometti sculpture. She never smiled anymore. He pulled her close and kissed her, feeling how tightly she was coiled inside.

"Success is money," Chollie said. "Duh."

"Success," Sallie said, "is finding your greatness, hush puppies. Lotto, you were born with it. I saw it the moment you came screaming out of your mother. Middle of a hurricane. You're simply not *listening* to what your greatness is. Your father told me he always thought you'd be the president of the U.S.A. or an astronaut. Something bigger than big. It's in your stars."

"Sorry to disappoint you," Lotto said. "And my stars."

"Well. You also disappointed our dead father," Rachel said, laughing.

"To our disappointed dead father," Lotto said. He raised his glass at his sister and swallowed the bitterness.

Mathilde came back in the door, carrying a tray. Glorious in her silver dress, her hair platinum, in a Hitchcock twist: she'd gotten fancy since she'd been promoted six months earlier. Lotto wanted

to take her into the bedroom and engage in some vigorous frustration abatement.

Save me, he mouthed, but his wife wasn't paying attention.

"I'm worried." Mathilde put the tray down on the counter in the kitchen, turned to them. "I left this up there for Bette this morning, and it's 11, and she hasn't touched it. Has anyone seen her the last few days?"

Silence, the clicking of the heirloom clock Sallie had brought in her duffel. They all looked ceilingward, as if to see beyond the layers of plaster and floorboard and carpet into the cold, dark apartment; it would prove silent save for the refrigerator hum, a large cold lump on the bed, the only thing breathing the hungry tabby rubbing against the window.

"M," Lotto said. "It's Christmas. She probably left yesterday for some relative's place, forgot to tell us. Nobody's alone on Christmas."

"Muvva is," Rachel said. "Muvva's alone in her dank little beach house, watching the whales with her binocs."

"Bull honkey," Sallie said. "Your mother had her choice, and she chose her agoraphobia over spending Christ's birthday with her children. Believe me, I know it's a disease. I live with it every dang day. I don't know why every year I buy her a ticket. This year she even packed. Put on her jacket, her perfume. Then just sat on the couch. She said she'd rather organize the photo boxes in the spare bathroom. She made her own choice, and she's a grown woman. We can't feel bad."

Her pinched lips belied her words. Lotto felt a rush of relief. Her scratching at him tonight, her picking and prodding, arose from her own guilt.

"I don't feel bad," Rachel said, but her face was also drawn.

"I do," Lotto said quietly. "I haven't seen my mother for a long time. I feel very bad."

Chollie heaved a sarcastic sigh. Sallie glared at him. "Well, it's not like you kids can't go see her," Sallie said. "I know she cut you off, but all you have to do is spend five minutes with her and she'll love you both. And that's a promise. I can make it happen."

Lotto opened his mouth, but there was too much to say, and it was all sour toward his mother, un-Christmasy, and so he shut it and swallowed the words back.



Mathilde put a bottle of red wine down hard. "Listen. Your mother's never been inside this apartment. She has never met me. She chose to be angry and stay angry. We can't be sorry for her choices." Lotto saw her hands trembling; rage, he realized. He loved the rare times she showed how thin her calm surface was; how, beneath, she boiled. A perverse part of Lotto, it's true, wanted to lock Mathilde and his mother in a room and let them claw it all out. But he wouldn't do that to Mathilde; she was far too sweet to spend even a minute in his mother's company without coming out maimed. She turned off the chandelier so the Christmas tree with its lights and glass icicles overcame the room, and he pulled her onto his lap.

"Breathe," Lotto said softly into his wife's hair. Rachel blinked in the tree's gleam.

Sallie had been speaking hard truths, he knew. It had become evident over the past year that he could no longer count on his charm, which had faded; he tested it again and again on baristas and people reading in the subway and during audition gauntlets, but beyond the leeway given to any moderately attractive young man, he didn't have it anymore. People could look away from him these days. For so long, he had thought it was just a switch he could flick. But he had lost it, his mojo, his juju, his radiance. Gone, the easy words. He could not remember a night when he hadn't fallen asleep drunk.

And so he opened his mouth and began to sing. "Jingle Bells," a song he hated, and he was never the world's best tenor anyway. But what else was there to do except sing in the face of dismay, the image of his fat mother sitting up alone by a potted majestic palm strung with colored bulbs? The others now were joining in, miraculous, all of them save Mathilde, still rigid with anger, though she was softening, a smile cracking her lips. At last, even she sang.

Sallie watched Lotto, cleaving. Her boy. Heart of her heart. She was clear-eyed, knew that Rachel, being of finer moral stock, kinder, humbler, deserved her affection more than Lotto. But it was Lotto for whom Sallie woke praying. These years of distance were hard on her. *[In a one-horse open sleigh.]* It came back to her now, the Christmas before he'd finished college, before Mathilde, when he had met Sallie and Rachel in Boston, where they stayed at a redoubtable ancient hotel and were snowed in under three feet of powder, like being stuck in a dream. Lotto had maneuvered a rendezvous with a girl at another table at dinner, his smoothness so like his mother's when she was young and lovely that it took Sallie's breath away. Later, Sallie waited in ambush until midnight, standing at the diamond window at the end

Mathilde could save Lotto from his own laziness, Sallie had thought, but here they were, years later, and he was still ordinary.

of the hallway where their rooms were, the endless snow falling onto the Common at her back. *[O'er the fields we go.]* At the other end, in minuscule, three hotel maids with their trolleys were laughing, shushing one another. At last, her boy's door opened and he emerged, bare but for a pair of running shorts. There was a towel around his neck; he was going up to the pool. The sin he intended to enact so glaringly obvious that Sallie's cheeks burned in imagining the girl's buttocks gridded with tile marks, Lotto's knees scabby in the morning. Where did he learn such confidence? she thought, as he became smaller, going toward the hotel maids. He said something and all three pealed, and one gave him a little flick with a cloth, and another sent a slow glitter, chocolates, at his chest. *[Laughing all the way, ha-ha-ha!]* He caught them. His laugh rumbled back to Sallie. How ordinary he was becoming, she'd thought. He was turning banal. If he weren't careful, some sweet girl would glue herself to him, Sallie saw all those years ago, and Lotto would drift into marriage, a job as some high-paid menial, a family, Christmas cards, a beach house, middle-aged flab, grandchildren, too much money, boredom, death. He'd be faithful and conservative in old age, blind to his privilege. When Sallie stopped crying, she found herself alone, the cold draft of the window at her neck and on both sides the rows of doors went on and on, diminishing to nothing at the end. *[What fun it is to ride and sing a sleighing song tonight, oh!]* But glories! Mathilde came, and though she appeared to be the selfsame sweet girl Sallie had been afraid of, she was not. Sallie saw the flint in her. Mathilde could save Lotto from his own laziness, Sallie had thought, but here they were, years later, and he was still ordinary. The chorus caught in her throat.

A stranger hurrying as fast as he could over the icy sidewalks looked in. He saw a circle of singing people bathed in the clean white light from a tree, and his heart did a somersault, and the image stayed with him; it merged with him even as he came home to his own children, who were already sleeping in their beds, to his wife crossly putting together the tricycle without the screwdriver that he'd run out to borrow. It remained long after his children ripped open their gifts and abandoned their toys in puddles of paper and grew too old for them and left their house and parents and childhood, so that he and his wife gaped at each other in bewilderment as to how it had happened so terribly swiftly. All those years, the singers in the soft light in the basement apartment crystallized in his mind, became the very idea of what happiness should look like. *A*

Lauren Groff's third novel, Fates and Furies, *from which this story is excerpted, will be published in September.*

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Q: WHAT FICTIONAL CITY (OR OTHER LOCALE) WOULD YOU MOST LIKE TO INHABIT?





Howard Shore, composer, *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*
Rivendell, a Tolkien creation where the culture, wisdom, and lore of the Elves of the Elder Days were preserved. A timeless realm hidden in a valley, Rivendell was worldly, a treasury of Elrond's good counsel.

Witold Rybczynski, architect and author
Broadacre City. Most people now consider Frank Lloyd Wright's sprawling arcadian vision to be an old man's foible, but wouldn't it be nice to find out for oneself? Anyway, who could resist living on a farmlet in one of his beautiful houses—with your own private gyrocopter in the driveway?

Mary Gaitskill, novelist
I would like to live in the **London of J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*,** because it is a gentle and lovely place without being insipid, where the most terrible things are linked with the most beautiful, and eccentric humor is the norm. A world like ours, only more delightful.

Tim Herlihy, screenwriter
Innisfree, the scenic Irish village where John Wayne retires in *The Quiet Man*, seems pretty cool. The people are cheerful and friendly and have a fairly nonjudgmental attitude vis-à-vis day drinking. Also, it's apparently customary to receive some sort of payment for marrying Maureen O'Hara. But I could do without the brawling.

Terry Crews, actor
Dr. Seuss's Who-ville. Every night there would be a feast and performances by different Whos, and we'd support their efforts instead of publicly shaming them. If the Grinch came and stole all our worldly possessions, we would know we could always make more, because we'd realize that how much money we have has nothing to do with wealth. The wealth is in our ideas!

Margaret Atwood, poet and novelist
The desirability of where you are depends on who you are. But **the idyllic Paris of Henry James's *The Ambassadors*** would be very appealing so long as I could have an independent income, a pair of mauve gloves, a parasol, and a secret lover. Otherwise **the metropolis of *Blade Runner*,** if I could be a top-grade replicant.

Chelsea Peretti, comedian
I would like to retire to **the island from *Lost*,** because it cures cancer and paralysis. In most cases. I think. I'm not sure I truly understood anything that happened on that island. If nothing else, I'd eat feral-boar meat and drink coconut water and wander around shouting "Walt!"



Colin Trevorrow, director, *Jurassic World*
A good city subverts your expectations until everything is upside-down and backwards. **Lewis Carroll's Wonderland** is such a place: one that starts with hopes and dreams, then throws out gravity, logic, physics, and all the laws of our universe.

Edward Glaeser, economist
In Isaac Asimov's Foundation series, **Terminus,** the city founded by a farseeing social scientist, is a New Yorker's fantasy—a place where bookish scholars, swashbuckling merchant princes, and canny urban politicians come together to save the universe and best their enemies, usually using IQ alone. Terminus is a place that spreads knowledge—the great task of all cities—and succeeds spectacularly in preserving humanity's wisdom as the universe hurtles toward darkness.

READER RESPONSES

Chris Morrison, Marietta, Ohio
Gotham. The artistry, the architecture, the noir.

Norm Riggs, North Ferrisburgh, Vt.
Bedrock, so I could ride to work on a dinosaur.

Jim Donelon, St. Petersburg, Fla.
Atlantis.

Deana Burke, Staatsburg, N.Y.
The Matrix. That is, if we don't live there already.

Want to see your name on this page? E-mail **bigquestion@theatlantic.com** with your response to the question for our November issue: What science-fiction gadget would be most valuable in real life? And check out **theatlantic.com/bigquestion** to see how Kumail Nanjiani, Bruce Katz, and others answered this month's question.

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